The Science of Popularity

Aim: To determine the characteristics for any individual to become popular amongst school cliques.

Introduction: Fitting in is the ability to blend, to fly under the radar, to survive. It’s what all high school students strive for, and few achieve. Not because they don’t try, because trust me, we do, but because fitting in is something that is almost impossible for the average student to do. I should know – I’ve spent the past eleven years of school trying to fit in, yet never quite succeeding.

My name is Alexandra and I am currently in my senior year at Newview High, an upmarket private school with the vision of “Shaping and developing the young leaders of tomorrow”. As far as I am concerned, school is a ridiculous excuse for the daily humiliation and public ridicule of the ‘undesirables’ – the nerds, the musicians, the technicians, the writers, the general academics and me. This taunting usually comes from the ‘desirables’; the well-toned, muscular sports stars or the slim, tanned girlfriends of said males. This torment is one of the numerous reasons for undertaking this experiment. I would like my final year of high school to be a memorable one, not one spent hiding in a stall (Stall 1, to be specific) of the girl’s bathroom. I would like to be able to walk down the school hallways with my head held high as people greet me in a civil manner, rather than sneering and throwing lunch scraps at my person. I must concede the fact that it is sad that I have to go to such extremes to (potentially) fit in, especially after eleven (now twelve) years attending Newview High.

Whilst reviewing the research I have gathered from various sources for this experiment, I have observed that most high schools report a sense of comradeship between students in Grade 12, as the bonds between them have grown and strengthened over the years of schooling together. Unfortunately, Newview High can boast no such success, as the individuals in the graduating class of 2020 seem to have drifted further apart over the past twelve years, which in turn has created tension and appears to have resulted in a division of the grade, as seen through the popularity placing’s (although this theory has not yet been proven).
Over the past few years, I have been observing some of my school acquaintances, and based on their performance, have been able to pinpoint certain characteristics that popular students, or ones who fit in, possess. Fitting in appears to involve, but is not limited to:

- Having the right friends who will boost your social status.
- The ability to wear clothes that do not offend any of the school groups. The clothes are cool enough for the in-crowd, yet casual enough for the not-so-cool crowd.
- No outfit may be repeated twice and all outfits must contain at least one piece of designer/brand clothing.
- Outfits must say “I just woke up like this” and “I spent two hours last night picking this colour coordinated outfit” at the same time.
- Being able to talk the “language” of all the school cliques, from gaming nerd to gossiping socialite, without appearing interested in conversations with those deemed socially unacceptable.
- The ability to achieve no lower than C and no higher than a B- in every subject (although PE doesn’t count).
- Mastering the look of disinterest whilst engaging in casual conversation, yet still being able to reiterate the main points of any discussion when asked by a third party.
- The skill of not offending any individual (as they make become popular one day) yet still being able to distance oneself from the ‘undesirables’.
- Having a boyfriend/girlfriend who has an equal or high social ranking than oneself.
- The ability to adjust and conform to any situation or conversation that may arise.

I intend to take this research and test my hypothesis in my last year of schooling – Year 12. I aim to record the results of these tests, and other notable events that occur, in this document, which will serve the dual purpose of being both a diary and a scientific note-taking journal. This journal, however, will not be a scientific write-up in the truest sense of the word, as there will be no abstract (for that would ruin the ending) and discussion, which is normally a significant part of a write-up. Despite the fact that this report will lack in those areas, I still intend to conduct this experiment in the appropriate scientific manner and I will endeavour to create a thorough account of the events to come. I may well publish this document in the hopes of easing the suffering of similarly disadvantaged students (contingent, of course, on this experiment being either highly successful or
failing whilst being highly amusing, or both). If I am to publish this, I probably should inform you, the reader, about myself so you can understand what this experiment is all about, the variables and the test subject. However, before you continue reading (assuming someone is reading this, and I am not pointlessly talking to myself) you should know that this experiment is more than just an interesting idea or a hypothesis to be tested – it is a matter of social life or death. It is my lifeline, the only thing that will enable me to endure this year. My experiment must not, or cannot, fail.

**Hypothesis:** If the characteristics mentioned above (in the introduction) are applied to a test subject, the resulting consequence will be that the individual will experience an increase in popularity.

**Variables:**

- **Independent variable:**
  - The reaction of test subjects’ school acquaintances.

- **Dependent variable:**
  - The rise (or fall) in popularity of test subject

- **Controlled variables:**
  - The environment (school)
  - The students
  - The test subject
  - The duration of the experiment
  - The characteristics required to be popular
  - The test subjects’ social status and friends (or lack thereof).

**Materials:**

- 1 test subject (i.e. me, a socially awkward yet otherwise brilliant female, aged 17, starting Year 12)
• 1 (average) private high school
• 50 seventeen year olds starting Year 12, and in the same high school as the test subject
• 1 computer (for observations, scientific documentation and/or venting)
• 1 over-protective single father

Method:

*Note*

A method is (essentially) a list of repeatable steps that result in (hypothetically) the exact result every time. Since, at the present moment, I have no set course of action, and I will not be able to remember everything that happened by the end of this year, I intend to write this method as a diary. Each new instruction will indicate a new day (although it will not necessarily correspond with the actual date), and the method will be written in first person, rather than the formal language and third person perspective normally associated with a method list. The following method will be a shortened version of real events, with only major occurrences that directly affect the outcome of this experiment chronicled. Obviously, this will not result in a repeatable method; however, based on different life and social statuses, this experiment cannot be expected to yield the exact same results every time attempted, especially when tried by different individuals. As such, the following method serves only as a guideline, or a template, for my experiment, and results will vary with other test subjects.

1. It occurred to me during science today that should anyone be reading this experiment write-up, they would not understand the individuals in my grade, their respective social statuses and their impact and influence on the experiment. As such, I took the liberty of writing up a table of individuals in my grade and some general information (unbiased, third party observations) about them, so that the reader will understand who they are and their social standing. It is a rather long table; however, as in any science experiment, tables are necessary resources that are extremely helpful when conducting the experiment and I believe that this table will be just as enlightening.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Ranking</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>General Information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Samuel Davis</td>
<td>The school “hottie” and alpha male. He has a 6-pack and chiselled jaw, plays basketball and cricket, and is a regional representative for 100m, 200m, 500m and 2000m track events. Samuel is dating number two, Piper Turner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Piper Turner</td>
<td>The leader of the popular crowd and dating number one, Samuel Davis. Blonde hair, tanned and an only child. Currently failing Maths, History and Business. Her parents own a chain of beauty salons, which she will inherit when she turns 21, even though she is a hopeless beautician and business manager.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Amelia Carter</td>
<td>Captain of the netball team and dating number 5, Brock Wilson. Best friends with Piper Turner since 6th grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Austin Hayes</td>
<td>All-round player in Rugby League and easy on the eyes (in terms of looks). Achieved a Credit on the semester one report card. Currently single.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Brock Wilson</td>
<td>Surfer with a tan and muscles. Best friends with number one, Samuel Davis, and dating number 3, Amelia Carter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Xavier Chavez</td>
<td>French transfer student who doesn’t speak English, however, due to his deep, husky voice and model looks; he is one of the most desirable males in the grade. He is failing all his classes except French.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Victoria Hansen</td>
<td>An individual with a talent for gossiping and backstabbing. The only reason she is popular is because she knifed (obviously, not literally) several people who made the mistake of confiding in her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Logan Reid</td>
<td>Another member of the cricket team and a great wicket keeper. Logan had an on and off relationship with Piper</td>
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Turner for several years, at which point he was number 4, before she dumped him for Samuel. He now refuses to date, even though several girls like him due to his popularity status.

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<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>Elizabeth Jennings</strong></td>
<td>One of three triplets (sister to Chloe and Ella). Relies on her sisters to boost her social status, and the fact they share a birthday means they have giant and extravagant birthdays. The triplets constantly swap places on the social ladder; partially due to the fact no-one can tell them apart — even after 5 years of attending Newview High.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>Chloe Jennings</strong></td>
<td>One of three triplets (sister to Elizabeth and Ella). Relies on her sisters to boost her social status, and the fact they share a birthday means they have giant and extravagant birthdays. The triplets constantly swap places on the social ladder; partially due to the fact no-one can tell them apart — even after 5 years of attending Newview High.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>11</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ella Jennings</strong></td>
<td>One of three triplets (sister to Chloe and Elizabeth). Relies on her sisters to boost her social status, and the fact they share a birthday means they have giant and extravagant birthdays. The triplets constantly swap places on the social ladder; partially due to the fact no-one can tell them apart — even after 5 years of attending Newview High.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
<td><strong>Tony Jackson</strong></td>
<td>Son of Pete Jackson, who owns the local ice-cream store, which Tony works at. Sadly, people are only friends with Tony so they can get discounts on their ice-creams, which he does know about, but doesn’t mind. According to Tony, a fake popular friend is better than no friend at all.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>13</strong></td>
<td><strong>Joshua Clark</strong></td>
<td>A cross-country runner with severe acne and a love for the</td>
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TV show The Simpsons. Has dated all three of the Jennings triplet, which caused some controversy and resulted in his higher social standing.

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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Lily Watson</td>
<td>A beautiful ballet dancer who is widely regarded as being a tad conceited. Used to getting her way, and prone to throwing tantrums if she doesn’t (she’s an only child who has always been spoiled). She has gained this position mainly through the fear she generates during one of her tantrums.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Kylie Brooks</td>
<td>A member of the school’s netball team (wing defence); she plays the flute and paints. She doesn’t talk much, so nobody in the popular group minds when she eats with them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Jack Foster</td>
<td>A soccer player, Jack is quickly working his way up the social ladder due to his good looks, charm and soccer skills. He only moved here this year, and is on a sport scholarship, but he doesn’t like to publicise this (as scholarships, even sporting ones, are socially unacceptable).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Christian Griffin</td>
<td>Christian is best mates with number 8, Logan Reid, due to the fact they play cricket together on the same team. He goes to the gym every evening, and wishes to become a sports psychologist when he leaves school (and regularly brags about this to anyone who will listen).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Zoe Ross</td>
<td>A wild partyer, Zoe cares more about having a good time than doing well in school. She has developed quite a reputation (and not for the right reasons), among the males of Newview High. Zoe also (allegedly) has problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Samantha Warren</td>
<td>Samantha’s parents own a chain of fashion boutiques, which normally would result in a high social ranking. However, Samantha has anger management issues, and whilst people still want to be her friend (for the free clothes) they are cautious not to get too close in case of sustaining injuries to their person (thus, her lower ranking).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Hailey Gardener</td>
<td>Hailey (surprisingly) makes the top 20, even though she is a member of the debating team and is an academic overachiever. The only logical explanation for this placement is the fact she tutors most of the top 10, and therefore they allow her to associate with them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Adrian Grant</td>
<td>The younger brother of Scott Grant, a famous Newview alumnus. His brother plays professional rugby league, and the grade expects Adrian to follow in Scott’s footsteps, although his stutter and inability to pronounce even the simplest of words mean most popular individuals will not talk to him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Jacob Snyder</td>
<td>Best friends with number 21, Adrian Grant. Jacob is a well-built NRL player with a short fuse, so most people maintain a respectful distance from him. He has been known to pick a fight with people who disrespect him or his friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Harper Montgomery</td>
<td>Harper has been attending Newview High since preschool, and knows everyone, and all their secrets and discrepancies from the past 12 years. The members of the grade befriend her only so that she doesn’t spill their secrets.</td>
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<td>Page</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Henry Little</td>
<td>The class (or rather, grade) clown. Henry has a talent for practical jokes, and basically lives detention (he’s even made his own name plaque in woodworking for ‘his’ chair in the detention room)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Jake Reid</td>
<td>A pool player, Jake has dated almost every girl in the top 12, although this has both hindered and assisted his popularity, due to the fact he now has six girls with a vendetta to destroy him (socially at least) because he dumped them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Anna Carlson</td>
<td>Anna is a nice, kind person who is always happy to listen. The only problem is that as soon as you tell her anything, you can be sure the whole grade will know about it in less than half an hour. Her constant stream of gossip is the only reason anyone talks to her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Benjamin Wade</td>
<td>A curious boy obsessed with video games and other technology. In the four years he has been at Newview, he has not said one word. It’s an ongoing bet amongst the grade as to who will get him to speak first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Annabelle Sutton</td>
<td>A singer/songwriter, Annabelle spends most lunch breaks in the music room, chewing on a pencil and strumming on her guitar. With a voice like an angel, it’s only a matter of time before she is discovered and becomes famous in the music industry.</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Arianna Watts</td>
<td>Arianna plays national level basketball and can run rings around most of the boys. She is a strong advocate for human rights and believes that everyone deserves the same opportunities in life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 30   | Kayla Walsh    | Best friends with Benjamin Wade. Whilst they don’t (or
can’t) speak, their mutual interest in video games has resulted in a great friendship. She is the grade’s best chance of getting Benjamin to speak before the end of the year.

<p>| 31 | Jackson Wolfe | The school bully, Wolfe has a talent for making people feel awful. It is rumoured that his father walked out on his mother and him and this has resulted in a lot of pressure on him to support his mother. Unfortunately, with the way he treats everyone, no one has much pity for him. |
| 32 | Oliver Hawke | A baseball player with a lisp. He has had a crush on number 20, Hailey Gardener since anyone can remember, and he still hasn’t asked her out. In fact, he can barely speak to Hailey, let alone ask her out on a date. |
| 33 | Jeremy Chandler | The school’s computer whiz. He can build a functioning computer out of almost anything, and has made some of the most amazing computers by himself, from scratch. If someone has a problem with their computer, or wants advice, Jeremy is the guy to go to. |
| 34 | Abigail Tate | Abigail currently spends every Friday at TAFE, completing a course in interior designing. She wears the most amazing outfits, but the other kids feel threatened by her style, looks and will to succeed, and thus, have given her a lower ranking. |
| 35 | Christopher Todd | Christopher (or Chris) is an avid collector of baseball cards, plays chess and wears hideous Christmas sweaters in March. The only reason his name is not near the very end of the list with a sign saying “Weirdo” on his back is because his dad is a cop, and if he heard that someone |</p>
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<th>#</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Allison Vega</td>
<td>A member of the school choir, plays the violin, participates in public speaking competitions and any other co-curricular activities she can fit into her schedule. The only reason she is ranked number 36 is because everyone else was deemed weirder and/or more of a nerd than her.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Daniel Goodman</td>
<td>Daniel is number 37 through no fault of his own. His mother insisted on inviting most of the grade over for Daniel’s birthday party, and then proceeded to show baby photos and tell embarrassing stories to anyone who would listen to her, at which point his popularity dropped significantly and has never recovered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>John Floyd</td>
<td>John has ADHD, glasses and does not play well with others. He likes to be in charge, and has a tendency to go out of his way to annoy anyone who takes a leadership position that he does not receive. Needless to say, he isn’t very well liked by the members of the grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Stella Tyler</td>
<td>A timid girl who has a stutter and is easily scared. She is the target of many practical jokes and tricks that normally result in her running away crying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>Cooper Schwartz</td>
<td>Copper is one of those children who just aren’t good at anything in particular. He doesn’t do well in sport or academics and isn’t involved in any co-curricular activities. He simply sits at the back of the classroom and the class (for the most part) ignores him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Violet Hampshire</td>
<td>Violet made the mistake in year nine of publically declaring that Piper’s outfit was “so last year” and she is still</td>
</tr>
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</table>
suffering the consequences of this statement. Other than this foot in mouth moment, Violet is really a nice girl, but no one will talk to her (on Piper’s orders).

| 42 | Autumn Clarke | An extremely talented scientist, Autumn wins every competition she enters and looks set for a brilliant career. Her success is a sore point for many students, who (out of spite) believe that she doesn’t deserve to win anything and choose to ignore her. |
| 43 | John Richard | John is the third speaker on the debating team (which is arguably the hardest position), plays the piano, operates the AV for assemblies and is a devout Christian. All of these qualities make him an easy target for the other children, who seem to enjoy having a go at him. |
| 44 | Mia O’Conner | Mia spends most of her time in a corner of the library with her head firmly wedged in a book. She’s a quiet individual who does not agree with thoughtless violence, drugs, alcohol, smoking or celery and lives with her single mother in a small apartment outside the city. |
| 45 | Jaden Lang | The only student of Japanese descent, Jaden is the centre of many cruel (and often racist) jokes. From references to going back to where he came from to questions about his sexual orientation, Jaden is constantly being ridiculed, which really is too bad as he is a nice, polite boy with charming manners. |
| 46 | Morgan Short | Morgan is the best languages student the school has ever had. She is fluent in Spanish, Japanese, and Italian. She can also speak better German than the German teacher. |
| 47 | Julian Beasley | Unfortunately for Julian, Jacob Snyder called him Julie in |
Prep, because he couldn’t say Julian, and the name has stuck despite Julian’s best efforts to the contrary. This nickname is the reason for his poor placement in the social hierarchy.

Caroline has possible the worst immune system in the history of the human race. If she took the day off school every time she was sick (like we are supposed to) she would be at home permanently. She spends most of her time in the sick bay, and people give her a wide berth so she doesn’t give them whatever illness she has at the moment.

A timid boy who is ridiculed for his somewhat small stature. Caleb has not grown since the third grade, and can still pass for a small year one student, even though his uniform identifies him as a senior. This is a constant source of embarrassment for him, and a point that is constantly reiterated by the popular clique.

Information Unavailable (refer to scientific write-up)

Nathan is (obviously) the most unpopular guy at the school. He is a triple threat – nerd, (bad) practical joker and lacking in any sort of social skills. At the age of twelve Nathan had his first degree (he now has seven and a doctorate). He has a weird obsession with action figurines and practical jokes (none of which are funny or remotely original). As if this wasn’t enough, Nathan lacks any sort of social skills and once asked Piper Turner if she had undergone plastic surgery, or if her nose was just naturally at such an obscure angle. The members of the grade have
honoured his accomplishments by naming him the most unpopular individual in the grade, and many wonder why he is still in school, when he obviously does not need it.

2. This experiment has officially commenced and I have begun by changing my wardrobe. Gone are my casual yet comfortable t-shirts and jeans, and replacing them are an array of shorts (which ride so far up one’s Gluteus Maximus that they should be not be classified as pants), tops with ridiculously low necklines and other pieces inspired by the popular crowd and current celebrities. Why anyone would wear this virtually non-existent fabric (for it is not clothing) is beyond my understanding, yet it appears to play a part in being popular, and as such, I must endure this humiliation. After all, it is nowhere near as horrid as having spaghetti and soft drink spilt all over oneself (on purpose) by several of your acquaintances whilst rushing to class. It took two weeks of constant baths just to rid the spaghetti smell from my person, let alone the clothes, which have not yet returned to their original state and aroma, and I fear they never will.

3. Whilst I have updated my wardrobe, I am yet to have an opportunity to wear my new “clothes”, as Newview High does not have a free dress day until the very end of Term Four. Considering it is only the first week back, I may have to wait a while to wear these clothes at school; however, I plan to wear them the next time I am out in public, however ridiculous they may look. I was half-heartedly hoping that since it is now the very last year of school, the other kids might have had a sudden (and inexplicable) change of heart, and I would not have to carry out this hare-brained scheme. I have had no such luck. In the mere eight hours I have been back at school I have been publicly humiliated eleven times, had three bowls of salad and two apples thrown at me and been the target of twenty-five practical jokes. Sadly, today is one of the better days, and I suppose I am glad it was salad that was thrown at me, as it just falls off my shirt. Unfortunately, I was not so lucky with the apples. I now have a terrible headache and a massive egg on my forehead. Jackson Wolfe then went on to remark that the egg was an improvement to my face, which had the whole cafeteria in hysteric. Needless to say, I spent morning tea and lunch in the girl’s bathroom, coming to the conclusion that I am not quite ready to face the grade, and test my hypothesis. The only good that came from today was the information I was able to gather from my spot in stall one. Apparently, Piper is thinking of calling it quits with Samuel, but Amelia doesn’t think that it’s going to happen due to the fact that they spent the afternoon partaking in “PDA” (which took me half
an hour and a lengthy Google search to learn that it meant *Public Display of Affection*. Lily spent a full ten minutes boring everyone to tears (talking) about her new diet which is (to quote Lily) “working wonders for my complexion”. Victoria has heard rumours (which she probably started) that Xavier is planning to ask Kylie out to dinner and a movie, which, in my opinion, could be a bit difficult since he can’t speak English. Whilst it is obvious that this information is devoid of any intelligent thought, the evidence I have gathered suggests that it is crucial I not only am aware of this information, but am able to understand its significance and converse with other members of the grade about the data.

4. My Father has recently expressed some “concerns” over my “sudden change in style” and is now wondering if I would like to “speak to someone about what I am going through”. I just can’t believe how rich this is coming from him. I have spent years moping around and moaning about the many injustices I suffer, as well as being constantly upset about the endless torment I am subjected to on a daily basis. Not once has he expressed a single “concern” or offered me help and yet as soon as I take matters into my own hands and attempt to make a difference in my life, he’s suddenly worried.

In other news, I am beginning to feel a bit of trepidation about what I am trying to do. How on earth am I supposed to fit in with these girls? All they seem to do is gossip, whinge and ridicule anyone they can, so that they can move up the social ladder and gain popularity. It just doesn’t seem like the right thing to do, but then again, what choice do I have?

5. It is several months into the experiment and no significant change has occurred. It has occurred to me that I may need to increase my efforts and modify the experiment so I can begin to see some significant changes. Based purely on the conversations I have been privy to from the secluded spot in Stall 1, the most talked about topic is that of the dating situation. Whilst I find the idea of ‘dating’ a ridiculous teenage social convention that has no relevance in the academic world I wish to enter, I have made, as with any scientific report, the following observations in regards to this practice referred to as ‘dating’:

a) All members who are listed in the top 10 rankings of the social hierarchy have either dated previously, or are currently dating.

b) When any individual ‘dates’ an individual of a higher social ranking, the ranking of the lower individual is boosted to a level equal, or slightly above, that of their partner.
c) The dating status of any two individuals will be discussed for a minimum of two weeks, with high interest in the first few days, with talk tapering off over the two weeks, unless a constant stream of scandalous updates is maintained.

With these observations in mind, I have reached the conclusion that the only way to improve my social standing is to participate in this absurd social event in the hopes of boosting my ranking. The only question I must now answer is that of whom to ‘date’. Obviously, it must be someone of a higher ranking (which means practically anyone except Dr Nathan Vance), however, I would like someone of at least average intelligence with modest morals and who is agreeable to ‘dating’ me.

6. The school’s social hierarchy system is more volatile than a third world country with a raging civil war. According to Victoria Hansen, Amelia Carter was caught cheating on her (now former) boyfriend, Brock Wilson at the triplets’ birthday party on the weekend (which was an invite only affair). Apparently, Piper walked in on Amelia and Xavier ‘making out’, took a picture of them and sent it to half the school. This then resulted in Brock severing all ties with Amelia, and Xavier spending the past two days trailing after Kylie making ridiculous facial expressions (which are apparently ‘cute’ and similar to that of a young dog) in an attempt to regain her affections. Personally, I find all of these events inevitable and a ridiculous waste of time. I fail to recognise the necessity for such relationships between members of the grade; however, I myself find that I am forced to partake in such foolishness. After careful deliberation, I have reached the conclusion that the most suitable candidate for my boyfriend is that of Daniel Goodman, who is currently number 37 in the social hierarchy. He appears to be a considerate young man who will (hopefully) be agreeable to my proposal – we ‘date’ for two weeks, during which we publicly promote our relationship, and after which time he can ‘dump’ me as he is ‘too busy for a serious relationship’. In return, I will tutor him for the rest of the year in Chemistry and English (both of which he is barely passing). Whilst I detest having to undertake such a relationship, I see no alternative course of action to secure my spot in the school’s social elite hierarchy, and subsequently ending the constant stream of abuse I suffer.

7. Surprisingly, Daniel was agreeable to my proposal, and we are now heading into week two of our ‘relationship’. I am finding this relationship business to be rather easy and not at all intolerable – it merely entails walking to class together, sitting next to one another during lessons and lunch periods and encouraging
outrageous rumours about our relationship to fester. For the first time in twelve years, I have been able (and allowed) to sit with the other school children in the schoolyard, and I regard this as a truly significant breakthrough in the experiment, as well as a blessing. What is more, not one single individual has thrown a projectile at my person, or demeaned me with rude and insignificant titles such as “four eyes” for the duration of my ‘relationship’ with Daniel – an interesting observation which will surely prove to be significant in the remaining course of this experiment. I am beginning to feel despondent at the thought of this relationship being ended – not because I have enjoyed it, but because it is the only reason I have not been badgered or mocked in the past week. However, I cannot expect anything more from Daniel – he has fulfilled his end of the agreement, even with the detrimental effect on his popularity standing, and as such, it is only fair that I release him from his contractual obligations at the end of the agreed time. Whilst I do feel remorse for immorally using him like this, my popularity placement has risen from 49th to 39th, which is an incredible accomplishment, but also an unheard of feat in the history of this school – my popularity has not risen in 12 years, and it is unheard of for the bottom 20 ‘undesirables’ to progress up the chart whatsoever, let alone to move up 10 placements. Whilst I am by no means popular, my life is proving to be infinitely easier now that I have established a somewhat socially acceptable reputation. The only further question (which will deepen this experiment and question its validity) is that of what will occur after I no longer have a ‘boyfriend’ - will I be able to maintain, increase or decrease my popularity placement or will my life resort to its previous state before my arrangement with Daniel?

8. Several months have passed since my last entry, and the end of the school year has arrived. I do feel contrite over the fact that I have not documented every event that has transpired this year and normally I would be reprimanded in the scientific community for such slack work. However, as this method also serves as a diary of sorts, I suppose this lapse is acceptable and I did place a disclaimer at the beginning of this work. Assuming someone is reading this (which makes the assumption that I have published this work); I suppose you would like to know how Year 12 ended. Perhaps I should start with Daniel, as this is the last point of reference that you, the reader, have, whereas I (not surprisingly) know how this story ends. Daniel and I have continued to ‘date’, and are yet to terminate our relationship (although the original contract has well and truly expired) based purely on the fact that the relationship is beneficial to both parties. Apparently, Daniel enjoys the intellectual stimulation that our conversations provide and appreciates someone who does not hold him
accountable for his (or his mother’s) past misdemeanours. Conversely, I have come to the conclusion that ‘dating’ Daniel (although we prefer to think of it as a partnership of mutual convenience) has many benefits, not limited to that of having a friend, a confidant and an academic equal as well as the fact that the mistreatment I had suffered at the hands of the schools’ ‘elite’ has subsided (which we hypothesize is due to the fact that I am no longer a single entity that can be easily targeted, and the group environment I am currently privy to makes mockery difficult). The observant reader will have noted that I just referred to a group environment, which would normally refer to a party of many (typically, a minimum of four individuals). This is due to the fact that as Daniel’s partner, I have been introduced to his circle of friends, with whom I find myself engaging in challenging and brilliant conversations and debate. It is evident that I have finally found a place where I belong.

In other news, Newview High held its Year 12 Graduation Celebration and Valedictory the other evening, during which I received Year 12 Dux and the subject awards for Physics, Maths B, Maths C and Business Management (although all of these awards were jointly won with Dr Nathan Vance). As well as this, my application to Harvard University to study Physics was accepted, and I (and Daniel) start our studies next year, in the same class. Whilst I have not mentioned this previously, we attended the school’s formal together, and had a surprisingly good time. Our group decided to stand in a corner and just talk, or enjoy one another’s company – it was the last day of school, and to be perfectly frank, we no longer hold any regard as to what the other members of our grade think of us.

**Conclusion:**

I believe I can lay claim to the fact that this experiment has (for the most part), achieved its primary goals. I have increased my popularity (or at least increased my social standing to a higher level than previously at). I am no longer pestered by the school’s elite and I have finally seen the light of day now that I am no longer required to eat lunch in bathroom Stall 1 to avoid the objects thrown at me or escape being subjected to malicious comments. I find, however, that I am not sure that this experiment can be called a ‘success’. Whilst the experiment did prove that conforming oneself to society, and societal expectations, will result in some form of acceptance, this experiment did not support the idea that this behaviour will result in happiness, or joy
or even peace. I can strongly support the idea that by changing oneself, all that results is stress and unhappiness due to an inability to express the real ‘you’. I am not an idealist and as such, I understand the fact that this is not an ideal world where everyone can ‘be themselves’ and not suffer any repercussions. Speaking from experience, I know that some individuals in the school system have no choice but to conform and lose their identity, for the consequences of not doing so are far too great to bear. Nevertheless, I can also say that my obsession with becoming popular meant that I missed out on being friends with so many talented and unique individuals who, given the opportunity, may very well have supported me and been my friend in the years when I had none, but I did not give them the chance to do so. It was almost my own fault that I was an easy target for ridicule, as I was the one who ostracized so many of my fellow classmates. The observant reader may have noted that there were numerous members of the grade who were not mentioned in this report other than in the popularity standings table, and sadly, I will never know who may have been my friend or even just given me the time of day for a conversation, simply because I did not talk to them, as they were not ‘popular’. Being popular is only achievable by conforming yourself to societal norms, and giving up what forms your unique identity. This is perhaps the most important observation in this report— that relief from the persecution of the socially acceptable is too costly – it requires giving up everything that forms your personality. In the interest of full disclosure, I wish to leave you with this final observation – being unpopular or weird or even an ‘undesirable’ isn’t so much of an issue when you have a group of ‘undesirables’ who consider themselves your friends.
Dreamer

A gentle breeze caressed the hanging branches of the willow tree, making them waltz under the stars and sway to the concerto of chirping cicadas. Through a part in the curtain of leaves, a teenage girl stared at the reflection of the crescent moon on the still surface of the pond. Leaning against the trunk of the tree, she sat silently, hugging her knees to her chest and breathing in the tranquillity of the night.

Wriggling her toes in the emerald green grass, she smiled happily to herself. All she could feel was serenity and the blissful peace of having nothing to worry about. Not a single thought went through her mind that didn’t concern the present. Not a single worry, concern or unhappiness. The lullaby of night soothed her, luring her into a state of half-consciousness where thoughts floated away like leaves down a gentle stream.

Later, though the lack of boredom made the exact time indistinguishable, a lone figure was discernible in the distance. Slowly, as if it had all the time in the world, it grew closer. The soft crunch of dewy grass underfoot could be heard, a steady bass rhythm joining in the symphony. Judging from the features visible in the dark, the figure was male. He was tall, with thin limbs that reminded her of a birch tree. The personification of night, he had ebony hair, twinkling eyes and an aura that radiated familiarity and comfort, like a favourite blanket. He was quite handsome as well, she thought, with strong features juxtaposed against the softness of his smile.

He folded himself down next to her and they both sat, for a while, one basking in the presence of the other, neither wanting to disturb the calm with speech. Finally, she spoke.

“Have we met before?” she asked, her voice a sweet soprano.

“Of course we have met, little dreamer, and so will we meet again,” he replied, his voice deep and rich, washing over her gently. Again, they sat quietly, watching as the smiling moon lowered in the sky. Only when the cicadas were silent, and the waking birds took their place, did she speak again.
“What is your name, then, if we have met before?”

“Lorcan.” She was silent for a moment, as if carefully weighing each syllable in her head, before nodding deliberately. Her eyebrows knitting together, she paused in confusion.

“What’s mine?”

“Do you not remember?” he asked. She shook her head. “Then that is something you must discover for yourself, little dreamer.” They were silent once more.

When the sky turned pink, and the sun started to rise, its fingers softly caressing the cheek of the land, he stood.

“Where are you going?” she asked, sadness at his departure colouring her voice.

“Do not fret, you shall see me again soon,” he said. Then he turned on his heel and calmly walked away, slowly fading into the distance once more.

~

She laughed as she skipped through the meadow, the long grasses tickling her calves. Bright bursts of colour were visible as patches of flowers dispersed the endless sea of green. The sun shone down from a brilliant forget-me-not blue sky, white fluffy clouds reflecting the brightness. A large cream-coloured manor house could be seen in the distance, standing proudly behind several oak trees.

Growing tired from running and skipping, she made her way towards the towering trees and sat beneath them. The cool shade was a refreshing change from the ever-warming sun. Sighing happily, she watched as the tiny finches above flitted from branch to branch, singing as they went. She could even see a few butterflies from where she sat.

Suddenly, a deep voice rang out from behind her and she jumped slightly, startled. “You’ve always loved this meadow,” stated Lorcan as he appeared from between the trees behind her.
“You scared me,” she breathed, clutching one hand against her hammering heart.

“Sorry,” he replied, even though he was smirking as he sat down beside her. In the light, she had a chance to study him further. He had a strong jaw and his nose was straight and long. Dark blue eyes shone with mischief from under long, thick eyelashes. Long fingers tucked a stray strand of golden hair behind her ear and she felt her cheeks heating. He chuckled and it was such a happy, familiar sound that she couldn’t help but laugh too. She looked away from him, staring out at the meadow as she grinned.

“I haven’t seen you this happy and carefree for a long time, little dreamer,” he said nostalgically, his smile falling slightly.

“It’s such a beautiful day,” she sighed.

“I know.” His voice held an indistinguishable depth of emotion that surprised her, but before she could linger on it, he was standing in front of her, offering her his hand. “Take a walk with me?” he asked. She grabbed his hand and pulled herself up in answer.

Strolling around the outskirts of the meadow beside him, she couldn’t help but feel a strange sense of déjà vu. She pushed it to the back of her mind, though, enjoying his company far too much to focus on anything else. Lorcan continued to ramble on about seemingly inconsequential little things, but he was speaking with such animation that they were suddenly the most important things in the world. She felt warm and safe, wrapped up in his charisma and charm with the sun shining down upon them. She felt untouchable.

Suddenly a series of scenes flashed through her mind but they moved too quickly for her to make much sense of any of the images. She stood stock still, her eyes moving quickly from left to right, as if she was reading an invisible book. Then she whispered a strangled word.

“Aislin,” she managed to get out before she collapsed onto her knees, her head cradled in her hands.
“What happened, little dreamer?” asked Lorcan in a relatively calm voice despite the concern visible in his eyes.

“You called me Aislin,” she managed in a slightly stronger voice.

“I can assure you, I didn’t -” he started, but she cut him off.

“Not now. I remember it - it was in a memory. That’s all,” she said, the tremor in her voice all but gone as she scrambled to her feet, trying to piece back together the shattered security she had felt only moments ago.

“That will happen, now and then,” said Lorcan, comfortably, taking her hand and rubbing soothing circles on the back with his thumb. “It’s completely normal for you to have flashbacks.”

“But why is that? This isn’t normal. No way is this normal. Actually, it’s completely paranormal,” she ranted. “Wait, what happened to the sky?” she asked suddenly, noticing that the previously sunny day had turned stormy and dark within a matter of minutes. “And where have all the birds gone?” The meadow was now deathly silent. He stopped rubbing her hand.

“Ah, well... okay, I’m going to be blunt. This is a dream, Aislin,” he said solemnly, the twinkle gone from his eyes. “We are in a dream – your dream, to be exact.”

~

“How did we get here? I don’t remember walking,” she said, her voice echoing around the empty room. She looked out of a large arched window to the meadow they were in only moments ago. Now they were in a large entrance hall – she thought it probably belonged to the manor house she saw from the meadow. The floor was marble and an opulent horseshoe staircase led up to the next level. The only other thing in the room was an oval mirror with twisted metal vines decorating the border.
“That would be because we didn’t walk,” he said in a calm, almost bored tone, as if talking about the weather. “In dreams, time is warped. A single moment can go on for days or pass in a single second. The same principle is applied to space. Think of it like a map – you can either fold it, so two points that don’t normally meet would, or stretch it out, so suddenly it takes twenty years to walk to the corner shop down the street.”

“Um, okay,” she said, as if this was the most normal conversation she had ever had and she completely understood – even if she didn’t. “So, why are we here, then?” she queried, gesturing to the large hall they currently occupied.

“How would I know? This is your dream, after all. I’m just a passenger along for the ride,” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Well, there’s no need to be helpful, or anything,” she said sharply, narrowing her eyes at him.

“I can leave, if you want me to?” He raised his eyebrows in question, pointing to the large wooden doors just as a great gust of wind blew them open.

“No, no, no. Don’t go, please?” she begged, as he took a step towards the doors. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I’m a bit...” she paused, trying to make sense of the tangled clump that was currently her emotions.

“Confused, bewildered, confounded, emotional, tongue-tied at the sight of my handsome face...” he prattled, counting each one off on his fingers as he went. She glared at him. “If looks could kill...” he trailed off.

“I’d currently be wearing fluoro yellow at your funeral,” she added, smiling sweetly.

“That’s my girl,” he said, patting her on the head patronisingly before using her shoulder as an arm rest. Mind you, it wasn’t hard to do considering she was at least a head shorter than him. She
brushed him off, glaring at him harder. “If the wind blows hard enough your face will freeze like that,” he teased.

“If you’re quite done behaving like a 5-year-old, may we move on?”

“Certainly, m’lady.”

“Oh, shove off, you overgrown prat!”

~

She looked around the small room they were in, realising that it felt strangely familiar. There was a single bed pushed up against a plain white wall with a small cherry bedside table against it. Apart from a matching chest-of-drawers, desk and chair, there was no other furniture in the room.

“I can’t decide if this is a bedroom or a classroom.”

“Because it’s both,” he replied. She gave him a horrified look. “No, nothing like that! God, what has the world come to these days?” he muttered, shaking his head incredulously. “This is your room at the academy.”

“I’m sorry, did we miss something? What academy?”

“The Cassandra Academy of Dreams,” he said, looking rather bored. “Didn’t you notice the name entwined in the staircase hand railings? Well done, little dreamer. You’re as observant as always.”

She decided to ignore him.

“Cassandra? As in, the Cassandra who had prophetic visions that no one believed because she was cursed by Apollo?”

“The very same.”

“Well, that just inspires huge amounts of confidence, doesn’t it,” she muttered darkly.
“Yes, well, unless you have figured out a way to time travel and can go back and tell the founders that the name they are thinking of is absolutely horrible and completely uninspiring - suck it up, cupcake!”

“Defensive, are we?”

“Can we move on?” he asked sharply.

“Fine,” she snarled.

“Fine!”

“Fine!”

They were walking down a long hallway. Plain wooden doors broke up the endless walls of white, each with a bronze nameplate nailed to the front. She couldn’t read the names from where they stood, each one an unidentifiable blur.

“So why do I go to this academy?” she asked cautiously, trying to assess whether he was still mad from before.

“Because you, like a handful of others on this planet, including me, have the ability to walk in dreams, both yours and others’, and remember them,” he replied, his face impossible to read.

“Is that why you call me little dreamer?” she asked, curious about the origins of this strange moniker.

“No, not really. Honestly, the ‘little’ part isn’t even that hard to guess – you barely reach five foot,” he smirked, patting her on the head once more.

“Well, at least I have the ability to walk through doorways without banging my head,” she sniffed, crossing her arms.
“Touché.”

“Honestly, do you even have any brain cells left?” He didn’t grace her with an answer, but the corner of his mouth lifted in a smirk.

They walked in silence for a moment before she got impatient.

“Well, what about the other part?” she probed.

“I’m not doing all the work for you. Besides, how could I possibly even string a sentence together with the minimal amount of brain cells I have left?” he replied in teasing voice. “Since your intelligence is obviously superior, you’ll just have to work it out for yourself, won’t you!”

“Fine!”

“Fine!”

“Fine!”

“Fine!”

“Oh, not this again! Honestly, grow up!” she reprimanded, trying but failing to hide her grin.

“I have grown up. Can’t say the same for you, shorty?”

“Shut up!”

He just laughed, which proved infectious. Her laughter joined his. Along they went, smiling and laughing at each other, until they came across a door without a nameplate. Nothing else distinguished it from any other door they had passed. Silently, they stood, staring at the door. Inexplicably, sadness and grief washed over her. Swallowing down the lump in her throat, she pushed it open.
Inside, it was furnished using exactly the same pieces as her room. Apart from the bed stripped of sheets and the boxes in the corner, everything was the same. The sorrow she felt from just looking at this nondescript room was overwhelming and she sat on the bed. Clutching her knees to her chest, she pressed her face into the bare mattress and tried to breathe deeply. Slowly, calmness permeated her body. Then she began to recognise the scent emanating from the mattress. A mixture of spearmint and sandalwood and the fresh breeze that makes curtains dance at night.

Lorcan.

She sat up suddenly, and frantically searched the room for him.

He was gone.

~

It was dusk. She watched the sky from where she sat under the willow tree, her knees hugged tightly to her chest. The colours blended together until it was impossible to distinguish just one, like a painter’s palette. There were brilliant blues and purples and just a hint of orange framing the horizon, a promise of the returning sun.

She sat, watching the day retreat, warmth caressing her skin. Day dissipated to night, turning sinister, bare tree branches reaching towards her with gnarled, spindly fingers. The icy breeze ran its fingertips across her skin, bringing goose bumps to the surface. No cicadas sang. The willow branches didn’t dance. The moon didn’t smile.

He didn’t come.

~

The sun rained down warmth upon the courtyard, bathing it in mid-morning light. Creeping vines reached up towards the sky, wrapping around the supporting pillars. They sat there, on a stone bench, watching as blur-faced children buzzed around them.
“So, can we control dreams?” she asked, picking apart her sandwich and throwing the tiny pieces to the birds around them.

“What? Don’t be silly! Of course not,” he laughed, looking at her as if she had just asked the most stupid question in the entire history of stupid questions. “This isn’t like Inception or anything.”

“Well, then why is there a whole academy devoted to learning about them?” she questioned, looking confused.

He tore the crusts off his own sandwich before eating half of it in one bite. “Well…” he started, mumbling through a bite of bread.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full!” she chastised. He made a point of chewing slowly, swallowing and then pointed to his open mouth. “Gross, Lorcan!” He chuckled as she slapped his hand lightly.

“Well, the subconscious is responsible for every dream, despite whether it belongs to a Dreamer or a normal human, so you can’t consciously control them,” he explained. “However, some really disciplined Dreamers can plant an idea or path for a dream while they are still awake. The dream never goes exactly to plan though, so don’t try it. The main purpose of the academy is to teach children how to walk through dreams without getting lost… or hurt,” he added as a second thought.

“How can you get lost in a dream?” she asked, her eyes wide with curiosity.

“The subconscious is not something you can map out. The human mind is so complex, and so ever-changing, that dream walking is a very difficult business indeed. Basically, you can get lost so deep within your own subconscious that you can’t, or won’t, find your way back. The same thing goes for walking in other people’s dreams, except it’s easier to get lost in them because you detach your very being, your soul, I suppose, from your body to walk in another’s.”

“ Sounds complicated,” she remarked.

“Not really,” he shrugged.
“So, if this is my dream, then you’re dream walking in it now?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” he said cryptically.

“For crying out loud, this isn’t a game of heads down, thumbs up,” she said, exasperated. He just gave her a thumbs up and a cheesy grin.

~

“I hate being on playground duty for the firsts,” she sighed, wiping a single drop of sweat from her forehead. It was the middle of summer, and she cursed the idiot that decided the thirteen-year-olds were mature enough to watch the youngest children at the academy during the teachers’ lunch break. Well, most of the teachers’. A lone figure stood under the shade of one of the towering oaks in the yard, watching with eagle eyes.

“Well, it could be worse,” said a fifteen-year-old Lorcan. “You could have been rostered on for story time. Do you know how hard it is to get those kids into bed after supper? I hate it!” She nodded her sympathy. At least she had some points, though.

Once you reached the ninth form, of which there were thirteen, you could earn points to go off campus on the weekend by working with the younger children and Lorcan had promised to take her to the cinema on the next open weekend. She really wanted to see that new movie!

“Uh, I think I should cut all my hair off,” she groaned, pulling the matted, sweaty mess off the back of her neck into a haphazard bun. All the other girls in her form had cut their hair short for the summer, while hers reached the middle of her back in honey blonde waves.

“No!” cried Lorcan. “Uh, I mean… uh, I like it the way it is,” he mumbled sheepishly. She blushed.

“Really?”
“Um, yeah. Don’t cut it.” His face was a bright red tomato and she couldn’t help but grin to herself when he looked away.

~

The street next to the park was quiet, with not a single car in sight. When you thought about it, it was quite strange considering there was a set of traffic lights not far up the street. But Aislin didn’t find it strange at all because she hadn’t spared the topic a single thought, too busy enjoying the warm afternoon sun.

The park was completely devoid of people as well, with only the birds privy to their picnic under the trees. Lying on their backs, they tried to make shapes out of the fluffy clouds. She thought she remembered doing this before. It wouldn’t surprise her if she had.

~

*She had come to think of this place as ‘their spot’. The park was so peaceful that even the cars driving past couldn’t disturb them. They were in their own little bubble. Well, a bubble that included clouds.*

“That’s a bunny.”

“Well, that’s a frog. No, now it’s a... um, now it’s a caterpillar. It has undergone metamorphoses.”

“Isn’t that when a caterpillar changes into a butterfly? Not when a frog changes into a caterpillar,” she asked incredulously.

“Details, details...” he said, waving his hand.

“Okay, then,” she laughed, shaking her head. “That’s a car.”

“If that’s a car, then it looks like it’s crashed into a tree and even then that would be a long stretch.”

“If you get points for your, um, fraterpillar, then I get points for my car,” she huffed, crossing her arms.
“Fraterpillar?” he asked, trying to contain his laughter.

“Shut up before I ... use my magic wand to turn you into my very own fraterpillar,” she threatened, picking up a small twig beside the plaid blanket.

“You know, I have seen some incredibly strange things in my lifetime, but never have I seen someone being changed into a half frog, half caterpillar. This should be interesting.” He sat back, waiting expectantly.

“Why does it have to be half and half? Maybe it’s three ninths of a frog and five ninths of a caterpillar,” she argued.

“No wonder you didn’t pass Maths, you numb nut,” he laughed. She pretended to look hurt, which just made him laugh harder. “You also failed Drama,” he added, his words barely intelligible.

“You know what I didn’t fail?” she asked, a scary twinkle in her eyes.

“What?”

“P.E,” and she proceeded to kick him in the shin. Now she was the one laughing hysterically, clutching at her sides while he rubbed his shin, wincing.

“Keep dreaming, little dreamer,” he said, standing while pulling her up with him. “I bet I could beat you to that tree and back,” he challenged.

“You’re on!”

~

“These flashbacks, why do I get them?” she asked him, her voice solemn. They were walking down a street this time, paying no attention to any of the shops that they passed.
“Well, while you’re stumbling around in your subconscious, you’re bound to come across other things besides dreams. Or maybe your flashbacks are dreams. Or it could be vice versa. Your guess is as good as mine,” he said, playing with a loose thread on the hem of his shirt.

“I don’t think I like them,” she said quietly, looking at her feet.

“Why not?”

“The stuff I see in them, the things I feel – it’s a bit overwhelming. It’s like living years of your life in a single day.”

He nodded empathetically. “Look on the bright side – at least you’re remembering. You could be stuck as a nameless nobody for the rest of your life,” he joked.

“Thanks,” she replied, unconvinced.

~

The theatre was completely empty. Not even the smell of popcorn permeated through the vast room. They sat next to each other close to the back, away from what Lorcan had dubbed the ‘noisy children and crying babies’ zone’ at the front, closer to what she had secretly knighted the ‘couple’s zone’. Despite their position in the cinema, the air was thick with silence and unease, as both were deep in thought.

“Why have I forgotten?” she finally asked, her quiet question swallowed by the empty room.

He thought carefully for a moment before answering. “Some say it’s the mind’s way of protecting itself. It shuts down, giving the person time until they are ready to handle and deal with whatever experience got them there in the first place.” He stopped, looking as if he wanted to say more, but didn’t. Jade green eyes met deep blue ones, urging him to continue. He sighed, but carried on.

“Personally, I think it’s stupid. Why put off ’til tomorrow what you can do today,” he quipped. “But you were never one to do things the easy way, my stubborn little dreamer,” he said, smiling sadly.
“My way or the highway,” she retorted, trying to lighten the mood. “I don’t think I want to remember, anyway,” she added quietly, leaning her head on his shoulder.

“As much as it pains me, you have to remember. You have to wake up. Not even we can live in dreams forever,” he whispered gently, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

~

Quiet sniffling could be heard from the corner of the room. Looking behind a velvet drape, he found the source of the noise. Bright green eyes looked up at him, rimmed with red.

“Why are you crying?” he asked.

“Mummy left me here. I want to go home,” the tiny blonde girl replied, wiping at her eyes.

He sat down next to her behind the curtains. “She didn’t leave you here. She’ll come and visit on holidays,” he reassured. “Besides, you get to play with the other children all day. It’s heaps of fun!”

She didn’t look convinced. “And guess what?”

“What?” she sniffed.

“I found a way to steal the biscuits from the kitchen,” he grinned, his eyes filled with mirth. “But I need an assistant. Do you know any?” he asked, looking around the small nook they were in.

“I can help,” she told him, her tears gone.

“I don’t know, you look a bit small,” he teased. She scrambled to her feet.

“I’m not small! I’m five and a half!” she declared proudly, crossing her arms.

“Alright then, I suppose. Well, what are you waiting for? Let’s go!”

~
She was in her room at the academy again, only this time clothes were sticking out of the drawers and papers were strewn across the desk. Sitting on her bed, she picked up a picture off the table beside her. Why hadn’t she noticed it before? She smiled, looking at the scene within the silver frame. Lorcan was giving her a piggy back in the park, her chin resting on his shoulder. Both of them were smiling broadly, carefree and happy. She was laughing at the camera, completely missing the longing gaze Lorcan was directing at her.

A single tear splashed onto the glass. She reached up in surprise to touch her cheek. Why was she crying?

~

“What’s the view like from up there, Goliath?” she asked teasingly, lying on the blanket, her hands pillowing her head. He stood above her, watching as a bird flapped around in a neighbouring tree.

He laughed at her. “Want to see?” and he pulled her to her feet without further warning. “Jump on to my back,” he told her.

“And why don’t I just climb Mount Everest while I’m at it?”

“Fine, Sargent Sarcasm, hop onto the bench and then onto my back,” he said, leading her over to the nearest bench and turning his back towards it. She jumped on, wrapping her arms around his neck in a chokehold. “I think you need to lay off the biscuits,” he joked. She slapped him on the head. “Ouch! Do you always abuse the help like this? No wonder your cat ran away.” She raised her hand threateningly. “Joking, joking,” he said quickly. “So what do you think?”

She looked around the park. “I don’t know what you’re going on about. The tops of people’s heads aren’t that interesting,” she told him, resting her chin on his shoulder. “Besides,” she whispered in his ear, “I have a much more interesting view.”
“Oh, really? Well at least I can find where you hide your secret stash of chocolate biscuits just by looking around. No ladder required,” he laughed.

“You’ve been eating my cookies! You’re the devil incarnate!” she cried in mock horror.

“Would the devil do this?” he asked her. He then started spinning in tight circles, clutching her to his back.

“Stop, stop,” she laughed. “I’m going to be sick!” He just kept spinning until the world tilted and they both sprawled in the grass, laughing and clutching at their sides. Suddenly he was leaning over her, gazing deep into her eyes. Slowly, ever so slowly, he leaned in and brushed his lips against hers. Then he was pulling away.

“I love you, Aislin,” he breathed.

“I love you too, so much.”

~

The meadow was still and peaceful. She couldn’t have been more content, leaning against his chest while watching the sun rise. The fresh morning air washed over her and she sighed, breathing it in.

“Can we stay like this forever?”

“No,” he sighed, playing with her silky strands of hair.

“Will you be there? When I wake up, I mean?” she asked, turning to look at him. He stopped playing with her hair and gazed deep into her eyes, a wealth of emotion swimming in that look.

“I’ll always be there, little dreamer, watching over you.” She turned back to the sunrise, content with his answer. A single tear ran down his cheek. He wiped it away before she could see.

~
“How am I going to survive next year, with you gone?” she asked, her eyes glistening. It was Lorcan’s graduation – he had finally finished school. They were standing in his room for the last time that it would be his. Boxes surrounded them, waiting to be moved to a new home.

“Hey,” he soothed, wiping a stray tear away with his thumb before cupping her cheek in his hand. “I’ll come and see you on weekends and holidays and I’ll write all the time. Seriously, you’ll get sick of my horrible spelling and grammar,” he joked. She choked out a laugh through her tears.

“But I’m going to miss you so much,” she breathed.

“I know. I’ll miss you too,” he said sadly. “My heart will never be whole unless you are near,” he crooned. She giggled.

“You know, that was actually sort of romantic. Well done,” she praised.

“I do try for m’lady.”

Her eyes glinted with mischief. “You know what we should do tonight?”

“What?”

“Celebrate!”

“Is my honest, rule-abiding little dreamer suggesting that we sneak out of the academy and go to town? I’m so proud,” he said, holding a hand over his heart while gazing out into the distance. “From stealing cookies at five to sneaking out at sixteen – my work here is done!” he declared. He swung her up into his arms before pressing a kiss to her cute little nose, and then to her forehead and both her eyelids. Finally he kissed her properly, his arms wrapped around her waist, holding her off the floor.

“I love you,” she breathed when they broke apart.

He gave her a breathtaking smile before lowering her to the floor. “And I, you.”
Lying under the willow tree, her head pillowed on his stomach, they watched the stars. It was not yet close to day and the constellations twinkled down at them, smiling from the heavens. The night cocooned them, wrapping them up in its gentle wings, keeping them safe until dawn. Silently, they thought, content in the company of the other.

“What do you suppose death is like?”

“Calm and peaceful, I hope, but I imagine it is dreadfully lonely. Why do you ask?” he replied, his deep voice rumbling under her ear.

“I dunno. Is it not in the nature of human beings to dream about the afterlife, about what awaits us when we die?” she asked, turning on her side to face him.

“I guess. It’s just that this is a dreadfully morbid subject. I would much rather talk about a happier topic, like how beautiful you are in the moonlight. Is that a better topic?”

“You complete sap!”

“But you love me.”

“That I do.”

“That was an awesome movie,” she exclaimed as they stepped out onto the chilly street. She turned to face him, resting her hands on his hips. “Thank you for taking me. I had a wonderful night,” she said, looking up into his eyes.

“You’re most welcome, beautiful. Now let’s see about sneaking you back in,” he said, his eyes twinkling. She shivered. He wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her tightly against him, shielding her from the cold.
They walked down the street to where he had parked the car, smiling happily as they went, enveloped in their love for one another. He opened the passenger door for her and she climbed in.

Folding himself down into the driver’s seat, he started the car.

Rubbing his hands together once, he said, “Right, shall we go?”

“I don’t want this night to end,” she sighed, staring out of the window at the quiet street.

“I’ll sneak you out every night to do this, if you want,” he said, sneaking a glance at her quickly before looking back at the road.

“I think the teachers would notice if I started missing lessons,” she replied sadly.

“You’ll just have to tell them that I am your one true dream and that you don’t need any others,” he replied cheekily as they stopped at the traffic lights.

“You’re my favourite dream,” she said, swivelling in her seat to face him.

“I love you, Aislin,” he whispered, bringing his face towards her slowly. “I love you so much,” he breathed before kissing her. That single kiss imparted a whole lifetime of love and friendship, and the promise of its continuance until their dying breaths.

Parting, she rested her head on his shoulder, her eyes closed in contentment as she tried to catch her breath. When a light bounced across her eyelids she opened her eyes quickly in surprise. Two beams of light were bearing down on her. She pulled away, but before she could shout any warning, the incoming vehicle crashed straight into them.

Glass shattered with an almighty smash. Metal crumpled with a great squealing sound. Bones broke with a sickening snap. She screamed, her head hitting the window. Dots danced behind her eyes and her head throbbed. Droplets ran down her cheeks but it was too dark to see if they were blood or tears or a mixture of both.
She screamed and thrashed but a great weight held her down. She raked her nails over her cheeks and shrieked and cried.

“It’s okay, little dreamer. It’ll be alright,” a voice soothed over the noise. She would recognise that voice anywhere. It was Lorcan.

She opened her eyes and all she could see was him. She breathed him in with great gasps and buried her head into his chest. He stroked her hair softly, whispering sweet nothings into her ear while her sobs quietened.

“I don’t want to go back. Don’t make me go back,” she pleaded.

“You have to go back, little dreamer. You have to remember. I know it hurts, but you have to go back.”

She looked straight into his eyes, straight into his soul, and saw the pain and longing there. He knew what was coming. He had known what was coming all along. He pressed one last kiss to her forehead and stood up, pulling her up with him.

“You’ll always find me, little dreamer. I’ll always be there, even if you can’t see me,” he promised. Then he turned and walked away.

~

The pain was unbearable, a thousand red hot needles all over her body, stabbing her over and over. All she could hear was her strangled gasps for breath. She blacked out.

Later, though she didn’t know how much time had passed, she could hear the distant sounds of sirens, echoing in the quiet night. The pain didn’t hurt as much, now. The blood stopped pounding in her ears. Ever so slightly she turned her head. Pain radiated down her back but it was enough to see.
Lorcan was slumped in his chair, blood weeping from injuries all over his body. It matted his hair, making it even darker than it already was, tinging his skin a crimson red. But that wasn’t what broke her heart. What she saw next shattered it into a tiny, million, irreparable pieces.

His eyes, gazing at her, were blank and glassy.

Tears streamed down her face. She reached out with one hand towards him, grasping his fingers tightly in hers. His hand was still warm. She sobbed.

The sirens got louder and louder until they rang in her ears and pounded in her head. She could hear voices now, too, shouting directions and calling out. Never once did her gaze leave his eyes, or her hand let go of his. She sank back into darkness.

～

She was in an endless room of white. He was standing beside her, gripping her hand.

“I thought you had left,” was all she said.

“I had to have one last goodbye.”

No more words were spoken. All that needed to be said was conveyed through blue and green eyes locked in a forever gaze. A lifetime’s worth of thoughts and feelings were shared in those few moments. A single, glistening tear ran down her cheek, dropping silently to the floor. She squeezed his hand tightly before letting go. She stepped back.

“You’ll always be there?”

“Always,” he promised. She smiled sadly before breaking his gaze, turning on her heel and walking away.

～
Darkness danced across her eyelids as she became aware of an annoying beeping sound filling the room. Most of her body hurt, though it was overshadowed by the ache in her heart. Slowly, her eyes opened. She blinked as they adjusted to light coming from the corner of the room. A familiar figure was sitting in a chair next to her bed.

“Mum?” her voice rasped. Sympathetic green eyes snapped up to meet hers. Tears threatened to spill, and a lump grew in her throat.

She was enveloped into a gentle hug. “I know, sweetie, I know,” her mother soothed, stroking her hair as the dam finally broke and tears streamed down her face.

“He’s gone,” was all she managed.

“I know.”

~

She can still see him, at night. In the smiling moon and the way the stars twinkle with mirth. In the cool breeze that caresses her skin and how the wind carries echoes of his deep laughter. She knows he’s still there, watching her, just like he promised.

Night is her favourite time of day now. She waits for the stars and moon to shine down upon her as she sits under the willow tree. She waits for the singing of the cicadas and the gentle hoots of owls. She waits for the peace and calm she knows darkness brings.

But most of all, she waits for the dreams that night carries on its wings.
The

Broadcasted

Man
Prologue (I)

*Fatality*

Never had he felt so much pain, but never had he felt so much freedom. Tearing out the wires of the electrical generator and gripping the bare ends, death coursed through him yet for a moment he felt alive, escaping a horrid reality, imprisoned in a world of grey corridors, cold light and concrete walls. He knew he had no chance of dodging security; he couldn’t escape alive. But, God, I’m escaping, he thought.

His mind sealed out the sounds of scientists and technicians running in circles as the lethal current did its work. His limbs shook, his torso convulsed, his black dishevelled hair sparked. By the time he’d let go, darkness slowly grasped him.
Missing Buffalo Narrows Resident Found Dead After Three-Week Disappearance

Michael Waterfield, 26, last seen leaving work during a blizzard at 5:30pm on November 21, was discovered by fellow work colleague Walter West, dead on a dirt road in the forest north of Buffalo Narrows at 10:30 this morning. His car was found in the nearby lake. “The body was covered in ice and stiff from the cold,” said police investigators.

Waterfield, a newcomer to the Buffalo Narrows community, moved from Saskatoon upon appointment to the position of Assistant Director of Finance at Silver Pinnacle Technologies, and also in response to the tragic death of his wife. Whilst being approachable and friendly among the locals, he constantly grieved the dreadful loss of his wife in a car accident. At Silver Pinnacle, Waterfield was known for his “all-encompassing knowledge” according to Chairman Pierre de Marignac.

Officials, in collaboration with Silver Pinnacle, believe enough evidence has been collected to reconstruct Waterfield’s death. Driving back home from Silver Pinnacle, Waterfield most likely, amid whiteout conditions, made a wrong turn onto a dirt road that led to the lake. Escaping his drowned car, Waterfield tried to find help but died of severe hypothermia.
Waterfield’s funeral will be held on Sunday. It is understood he has no immediate family since being widowed. The funeral will be funded by Silver Pinnacle and be attended by company personnel and close friends. His body will be cremated after the service with the company taking ownership of his body. “He was exceptional,” de Marignac commented, “and a cremation will do him justice – a departure in a blaze of glory.”
Prologue (II)

Arrival

Screech! A pair of worn-out boots crashed down on the four-wheel-drive’s brakes. This was not the turn of events Officer Clement Gilmour was expecting at the end of a Monday road patrol. Moments before, he was admiring the snow-coated conifers lining the snow-obscured Highway 155 when someone darted from the woods and collapsed dead ahead. “Goddamn!” Gilmour shouted as the car slid over black ice. Slamming into a thick snowbank halted the vehicle, giving the policeman of ten years’ experience from La Loche a chance to catch his breath. “Damn.”

Zipping up his parka, he flipped the door open and observed the person – a man in a torn business jacket, flailing tie, scuffed trousers and matt-black shoes – trying to stand up. His face was red and purple with cuts and bruises. Whatever the case, he wasn’t dressed for the December winter, and looked overdue for a hospital visit. “Hey!” Gilmour shouted. “You okay?”

The man glanced hauntingly at him as the officer crept closer. He seemed to try and mumble something, maybe about how he’d been hurt. Still, Gilmour wondered, why the business get-up in this weather? He looked around, hoping someone else would come up the road to help out, but there was only the injured man – who began to vanish from existence, as if his individual atoms fell apart and rode with the wind.

All Gilmour could hear was the creaking trees. It couldn’t have been a dream; footprints had been left in the snow. Officer Gilmour remained speechless.
Monday

23rd

December
Part I: In Town
Sundown in the Canadian north came early in the wintertime afternoon, around three-thirty. Not long after five, darkness succeeds in defeating the sun. This was going to be a neat little test for the occupants of the car driving into La Loche.

“Are we there yet?” mockingly moaned a little brown-haired girl.

“Sally, the town’s not even five minutes from our log cabin,” the older brother in the car next to her replied.

“Are we there yet?”

“Give it up,” the father said as he rolled the rented car into one of the main streets of La Loche. “It’s so weird driving on the wrong side of the road while sitting on the wrong side of car.”

“Looks like it, Neil,” the mother of the children observed from the passenger seat.

The car continued to a parking lot by the lake which the town was named after – or maybe it was the other way around, the brother wondered. Looks like another research task in his quest for knowledge.

The Andersons, a family of four, had considered Canada as a holiday destination for a long time. Initially, Neil considered staying at a massive ski resort but, recalling a moment in Thredbo last July where he’d put his back out, he decided, much to the children’s dismay, to give it a miss. However, he and his wife Isabelle really wanted a white Christmas. It was Isabelle who chose La Loche by covering her eyes and planting her finger on a spot in an atlas. From then on, the choice was locked in despite the fact that next to nothing happened in La Loche. Their children were undoubtedly uneasy about going to Canada just to watch snow
fall off trees. After arriving a few hours ago at their cabin, a secluded wooden wonder
harbouring modern conveniences amid the frozen pine trees, the amount of snow around the
place was sufficient to meet the children’s imaginative needs, and the snow in the parking lot
alone was already working its magic. No sooner had their left the car when brother and sister
were locked in a snowball fight, white powder exploding on their loud winter jackets. Neil
and Isabelle could only laugh as they threw surprise snowballs at them.

Sally, the young sister, won the fight by default as was almost always the case. Brother
Edward, or Ed as he preferred, usually had to cave in to her. Both of them were bright, but
Sally was the brighter one, taking out academic awards and competitions left, right and centre
– and she only finished Year 8. Ed didn’t receive as many prizes, but he was much smarter
than most. Year 12 was over, offering him more time to do things with the family. His results
were some of the highest in Queensland, and family time was his real reward for all his
effort.

“Now, whereabouts are we here?” Isabelle brought up her smartphone to bring up a map, but
as is the case with older people and new technology, it didn’t go to plan. She immediately
asked Sally who took seconds to have the map show their present location. While being an
all-round know-it-all, Sally took special interest in computers and coding, and her mum’s
phone issues were peanuts compared to reprogramming self-built robots. “How could you not
know how to work a phone, Mum?” Sally groaned.

Despite his intelligence, Ed always felt a little jealous of his sister being this smart at such a
young age. Well, he could catch up. Research was his greatest hobby, and that usually gave
him an edge at trivia contests.
Time passed as they explored the village. Neil, in his somewhat comical oversized trenchcoat, bought from a convenience store the local newspaper, *The La Loche Daily*. Besides that, nothing stood out as particularly interesting in town. Any comments of praise typically came from Isabelle and Sally, pointing out the numerous trees trapped in tinsel and houses invisible to the naked eye because of all the Christmas lights shining from them. Eventually, the sun began its slow descent to some distant lair beyond the lake and the Andersons took a weathered bench. Neil read the *Daily*; Isabelle took a few pictures of the lake on her smartphone, the frozen lake mirroring the cloudless sky and the forest yonder; Sally played some game on her own smartphone; and Ed removed a Clive Cussler novel from his pocket. As he became engrossed in the book as its dashing hero and sidekicks blew up a boat to escape some West African military nuts, his father nudged him. “Look here,” he grunted, passing him the newspaper. “Try research *that*.”

He read the headline:

**Broadcasted Man Keeps Coming**

*Broadcasted Man?* he wondered.

La Loche’s Broadcasted Man made a visit to Poplar Crescent in the Clearwater River village yesterday afternoon.

Resident Mary Walden described the event as “surreal.”

Said Mrs. Walden, “Around four o’clock, I was sitting by the front window when I heard a loud ruckus. Then, watching from my window, a
ragged-clothed man appeared from thin air. He staggered down the street and looked at me through the window. Then he vanished like God put an eraser to him.”

This marks the fourteenth sighting since Officer Gilmour from the La Loche Police encountered our mysterious visitor last Monday.

“Fourteen sightings in a week!” Ed gasped.

“I knew it’d pique your interest,” his father said. “At least it ain’t another Illuminati conspiracy for once.”

Ed clutched the newspaper, trying to process the story. The pursuit of answers was what drove him to do well at school. No question was to be unanswered. That was how he’d gain such a vast wealth of knowledge. La Loche looked like his next project and he gazed across the lake as twilight ended and streetlights winked on.

“When’s dinner Dad?” Sally moaned.

“We’ll find some. C’mon, let’s go.”

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**Gilmour**

5:41pm

Ten minutes later, Isabelle pointed to a red-and-green-decorated restaurant and bar across the road. The Andersons couldn’t see any zebra crossings on the cracked, slushy road, so they jaywalked. Sally, at the back of the pack, was almost run over by a van which halted in the
nick of time. Isabelle dragged her off quickly, not wanting a standoff with its driver. Ed saw the driver cursing behind the windshield. Under poor lighting, the driver looked old and tired, wrinkled and bearing a scar on his right cheek. The van, blue in overall colour, had a professional-looking decal logo: a grey triangle with a white star above it, the letters SP printed underneath. The van darted off around a corner, sending a spray of filthy meltwater into Isabelle’s face. After she raised a fist to the fleeing van, the family made it indoors.

The restaurant was cramped for space, but there were few people in. A waitress seated them and took orders before Neil headed to the bar to buy drinks. When he came back, a lofty man of strong build and wearing a police badge joined them. Neil had already made a new friend at the bar as usual. The man introduced himself as Clement from the La Loche Police and quickly, like any man who’d just come from a bar, chattered away about his life story and recommendations for things to do around the place.

With meals served, Ed asked Clement if he knew an Officer Gilmour. “Ha!” Clement guffawed. “I am Gilmour, Clement Gilmour!”

Ed grinned in surprise. “See, I read this story…”

“Come off it Ed,” Neil interjected. “Clement doesn’t need the Spanish Inquisition during dinner.”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Clement reassured the father. “It’s this Broadcasted Man, eh?”

“Yeah,” said Ed. “What’s he all about?”

“I’ll tell you. You seem pretty keen.” Clement recounted his encounter with the mystery man from Monday, then proceeded to describe the reported subsequent events and supposed evidence. As this went on, Ed produced a pen and made dot points on the newspaper still in his possession.
According to Clement, the term ‘Broadcasted Man’ came about after the seventh sighting. It was noted that all of his appearances and disappearances seemed to coincide with electrical surges at a newly erected public radio station tower south of town. Interesting, Ed thought, a man probably being broadcasted via a radio tower.

“You’re not the only one interested in the Broadcasted Man, sonny,” said Clement. “An hour ago at the police station, a Silver Pinnacle representative in his blue van made inquiries.”

“Silver Pinnacle?”

“That’s an R&D plant down near Buffalo Narrows. The man, name of West, asked if the Broadcasted Man was dangerous. So far, he just scares the village senseless, but no attacks at all. That West guy really gave me the full workout, asked for descriptions, what he did, everything. Man, Mr. West looked old. Massive wrinkles on his face and some kind of scar on his cheek.”

“Left or right?”

“Right, I think. Why?”

“Just wondering.” Ed retreated cautiously.

Dinner done and bills paid, the Andersons departed the restaurant, bidding a Merry Christmas to the kind waitress and Clement who returned to the bar for another drink. Finding their car, they set off for the cabin that, for now, was home sweet home.
The Cabin (I)

9:45pm

In the short winter days of the Northern Hemisphere, sleep came early for Neil and Isabelle. Anticipating a big day ahead as per Clement’s recommendations on things to do, they went to bed at half past eight. Isabelle had asked the children not to stay up too long and had received nods of agreement. This agreement was duly ignored moments later. Sally, after sneaking a look at the newspaper’s Broadcasted Man report, went onto her laptop, playing against the computer in various games, most of which Ed couldn’t care less about. For him, the work had just begun. While Sally alternated between arranging cards and blowing up tanks on a screen, Ed’s eyes scanned every bit of information he could scrounge from his laptop. Even when Sally’s lights were off, his lamp stayed lit; he needed to know answers.
Part II: Crossroads
The Cabin (II)

10:20pm

“Some Christmas this is turning out to be,” Ed whispered to himself. He’d gathered everything he could and formed a conclusion, imperfect as it was: the Man must have some power to convert himself to digitised information that could travel via radio towers as part of a sophisticated teleportation system. How did it work? Beats me, he thought. Could be quantum entanglement. Could be –

He heard a crash in the trees outside, louder than the wild rustlings of the forest in the wind. The weather had taken a turn for the worst, he knew. It would be no exaggeration to say the cabin was hidden under sheets of snow. But about this Broadcasted Man, he redirected himself, what mechanism of teleportation could he use? Or maybe it was a hoax?

Clunk! His head turned at the sound. Clunk! The unmistakable sound of hard shoes on wood. Clunk! Someone must be on the balcony!

The door swung open. Sally came running in her pyjamas and clung to Ed. “Intruder!” she quietly squealed.

Looks like it’s not my imagination. “Don’t worry Sally,” he lied.

“There’s no reason for anyone to be out there!” She turned and shut Ed’s door. “He’s coming after us!”

“Sally,” he pleaded, “calm down. We’re safe here.” I hope, he almost said.

His sister’s mouth opened, as if realising something. “What if it’s the Broadcasted Man?”

“Relax, he probably doesn’t exist.” But that’s probably a lie. “Besides, he wouldn’t hurt anyone.” Fingers crossed. “How about I open my curtains and show you?”

“No,” she almost shouted.

“Sally.”
“No!”

He grabbed Sally’s arm tight. “Sally, quiet! If there is danger out there, I’m here for you.” He let go, confident that she would obey. “Now, let’s look.”

Ed went to the window by his bed. He’d had the curtains drawn all day and didn’t have a chance to admire the daytime view of the snowy forest and driveway outside. Unbeknownst to Sally, Ed was terrified of meeting this intruder. What was it his parents and teachers always said? *Stranger danger.*

His fingers curled around the edges of the curtains. Pausing for a moment, he reconsidered his actions. Is the intruder dangerous? Is it the Broadcasted Man? Part of him didn’t want to pull the curtains aside, but he was determined to prove to Sally that there was nothing to fear. *Nothing at all.*

“Here we go,” Ed sighed uncertainly.

In one quick movement, his hands shoved apart the curtains.

Beyond the window, a whiteout blizzard hid the winter flora. The blizzard itself was hidden by a figure lit by Ed’s lamp. Right at the window was a spindly man in a heavily-torn business suit staring back eerily at the children with wide eyes, icicles clinging to his black hair.

**The Broadcasted Man (I)**

*10:24pm*

Ideally, Sally would have screamed for her parents, but even in the warmth of the log cabin, she froze. Ed tried to remain calm but it was no good, becoming another statue. They remained so for a minute until he noticed something about the Broadcasted Man, his pallid
face close enough to the window his breath fogged the glass and his left hand pressed against the frame. It appeared the Man had joined the Statue Club as suddenly as the children. Now confident that the Man had no intention of breaking the window and mauling them to death, Ed approached the figure. He slid the glass open cautiously. The Man flinched backwards and fell off the balcony into the deep snow. Sally, in a moment of thawing, covered her mouth. Sticking his head out the window, braving the cold Canadian air, Ed called to the Man, “Can we help?”

The Man clambered out of the snow, a surprised look on his face. “H-h-help. Get me i-i-inside.” His stuttering voice was rough and desperate. “P-p-p-please.”

Moments later, the Broadcasted Man was in the living room, wrapped in blankets and drinking cups of kettle-boiled water. He was scratched, bruised and hunched over; some of his wounds bore dry crimson. Strange that Mum and Dad were still asleep, Ed thought. Hadn’t they heard the footsteps outside? He and Sally conferred in private whether they should wake their parents, but determined it would land them in trouble. Stranger danger, they knew. It would be better to keep the Broadcasted Man under wraps.

Ed watched the Man munch on a hot sandwich from Sally. “Thank you, little one,” he croaked.

“You’re the Broadcasted Man?” Sally blurted.

The Man sighed. “I guess so. I’ve seen what the paper’s been calling me.” At least he acted more human now.

“Uh,” Ed asked, “who are you?”

“Name’s Mike,” the Broadcasted Man replied. “Michael Waterfield.”

“You can call me Ed. Over there’s little sister Sally.”

“Sally, Ed, I don’t know how to thank you for your help.” Mike massaged his forehead.
"Need some paracetamol?" Sally asked.

"Thanks, that would be appreciated."

He received some tablets and swallowed them before asking how long it had been since the children first saw him.

"Ten minutes I’d say," Ed replied.

Mike clasped his hands and rested his head against them. "Better enjoy this break," he muttered. "It could go off anytime soon."

"What do you mean?" Sally asked.

"The device!" he exclaimed, sending his fist down deafeningly to the table. "That device must be faulty."

Ed’s mind clicked into gear. "Device?" he questioned his guest. "Does it have something to do with your teleporting?"

Mike’s eyes blinked. "Yes, Ed, it does the teleporting."

"The radio towers," Ed started, but Mike was quick to interject.

"The towers relay the computerised info of myself between locations. It’s all the work of the device."

"Where’s the device then?" she demanded. "I want to see it, it sounds amazing!"

Mike shook his head. "Maybe if you’re a surgeon, you can look at it." He tilted his head and stroked a finger along a faint line of raised skin behind his left ear. "See that? That’s where they inserted the device."

Puzzled, Sally asked, "Why’d you ask for it to be put in your head?"

"I didn’t!" he spat ferociously. "They made the decision. I found their secrets too soon, and this is how they dealt with me."

"They?" Ed’s curiosity of Michael Waterfield and the device knew no bounds.
The Broadcasted Man suddenly grabbed Ed’s wrist and eyed his wristwatch. Letting go, he rushed his words and paced around the room. “Look, time’s limited for me right now, but I need more help than you can ever imagine. That device attached to me against my will caused me to be locked away from the outside world for three weeks.” He grabbed a French stick from a cupboard in the kitchen. “There was no escape —”

“Escape?” Sally interrupted. “From where?”

“Just listen! So I decided to kill myself and end the torment I was under.” Sally’s eyes welled at the mention of suicide. “The only way was to electrocute myself, but you can see I’m still alive. Whatever the case, I was unconscious for a while I guess, then woke up in an enclosed space that was dark and seemed to heat up. Fire began poking through, I started banging the walls, cried for help, then suddenly the space dissolved from existence and found myself falling through the trees of the forest. Since then, I’ve been teleporting randomly around the place before ending up stuck in and around La Loche.”

Mike tore pieces from the French stick and ate. In Ed’s mind, pieces of the unbelievable jigsaw were falling into place.

“I’ve been broadcasted all over this area for a week now,” Mike continued. “My theory is that the radio tower between the new tower near the village and Buffalo Narrows stopped working shortly after my first few teleportations, and so the La Loche tower picked me up and tossed me around the village.”

Whatever his plight, this device had to be the greatest invention of all time. The children couldn’t be more impressed.

…” --- …

“But why the random teleportations?” Sally asked in earnest. “Surely you can control it, or someone else can.”
“Used to be controlled by my captors,” Mike answered, “but I think my electrocution stuffed the device’s programming. Now it operates at its own will. I’m at its mercy.”

She jumped up and hurried to her room, returning with her laptop. “If it’s a programming error, I can fix it.”

With Sally setting up on the table, Mike frowned at Ed. “Sally’s a computer whizz,” he assured the troubled guest. “It looks like your only chance at the moment.”

Quickly, the device registered on the girl’s laptop wireless software. A few clicks later, she was in the device’s system. Mike and Ed gathered around her as she scrutinised complex lines of code and perplexing digits. “Very sophisticated stuff,” Sally said. “There’s lots of hidden coding here that I can’t untangle but I can reprogram this to stop teleporting randomly. These lines here,” – she highlighted various digits and letters – “were corrupted during the electrocution and have caused a randomisation function to materialise. That would take ten minutes max to solve.”

But Mike was stepping backwards, his breaths deepening and quickening. “The broadcast,” Mike cried. “It’s coming.”

Not now, Ed thought. He had more questions to ask but only time for one. “Mike, who did this to you?”

The Broadcasted Man looked into his eyes, his mouth trembling at the words he prepared to say. “Don’t cross them,” he started.

“Who?”

“Silver Pinnacle.” Seconds later, Mike dissolved from view, an imaginary gust swiping the particles that made him through a vent in the ceiling. Sally didn’t grasp the meaning of the words, but Ed did.

“Silver Pinnacle?” Sally asked.
He wondered how tough Mike had to be to survive even a few days in the Canadian winter in the state they’d found him in. Ed realised a new threat had come to town. “They’re here,” he whispered to himself. “Oh, God help the Broadcasted Man.”

La Loche (II)

11:00pm

Highway 155’s north end had late-night business. A line of headlights ten vehicles deep thundered through the whirling snow. A blue snowplough led the way for the convoy, pushing aside the thick snow with the ease of a garden broom. A jet-black Bugatti luxury car followed closely behind it. Its driver was not the car’s owner; that person sat in the back seat next to another man. “We’re coming up on La Loche now, sir,” the chauffeur announced as the streetlights of the town came into view.

The backseat owner, a tall, spindly, spectacled man consumed by a large brown greatcoat that seemed decades old, simply nodded his red-haired head in unison with his younger colleague. “Sir,” the chauffeur continued, “what shall your accommodation be tonight?”

“It shall be the truck.” The coated man looked through the back window towards one of the blue trucks in the convoy. He turned to his colleague. “Monsieur West, where is it headed?”

“Clearwater River.” West replied.

“Very well.” The chauffeur continued his driving duty without another word.
Tuesday

24th

December
Part III: A Study in Silver
The Andersons’ car crawled into the smaller village north up the lakeside from La Loche. Everyone was decidedly excited – it was Christmas Eve – as the family strolled among houses draped in tinsel. There were even fewer things to see compared to La Loche, especially since last night’s blizzard dumped enough snow to make cars and sheds look virtually the same. Ed used the time to reflect on last night. Silver Pinnacle had somehow detained Michael Waterfield for finding some kind of secrets, and subjected him to teleportation tests as punishment, he assumed. Committing suicide had only knocked him out and scrambled the device in his head enough to broadcast him to random places at random times. Some story this was turning out to be, he wondered. Sounds like something a maniac would write as a story.

The family came across a tiny museum crammed into someone’s house. Paying the owners a few Canadian dollars per person, Neil and Isabelle gazed admiringly at the collection of worthless shipwreck relics from the lake. Ed and Sally took one glance and waited by the exit. While his sister went straight to gaming on her smartphone, Ed produced his own and began researching Silver Pinnacle. Finding their website, he noticed the logo design: it was the same as the one on the van that nearly ran Sally over. Probing further, he read through the great breakthroughs of Silver Pinnacle Technologies and the valiant history of the people who worked there; there was even a page about Mike, only it said he was dead. He wasn’t, and the picture on the website matched the face of the Broadcasted Man. Yes, Silver Pinnacle seemed to be undoubtedly a place that could devise such an advanced piece of technology so
sophisticated that it had to be kept top secret. No surprise now why Silver Pinnaele was in La Loche: they want their property back in the vault.

He ran a search on Mike himself. A paper from further south had reported his disappearance a few weeks ago, and this was followed up by an article from over a week ago proclaiming his body had been found and was set to be cremated at a funeral. The case was starting to make more sense now. The space that Mike woke up in must have been the coffin during its cremation. As for the finding of his ‘dead’ body, maybe they planted him in the forest, all dressed up for the act. Ed felt chills up his spine now but it wasn’t the cold weather. Mike’s disappearance reeked of professional deceit and Silver Pinnaele had pulled it off – except he escaped under incredible circumstances and was on the loose.

“I’ve seen enough,” Isabelle said upon leaving the museum. “Why don’t we go on a drive through the forest?”

“Brilliant,” Neil answered. He looked towards the cloudless sky. “Might as well do it while the weather’s clear.”

The Andersons took to the car and drove off for the Canadian backcountry. As they rounded a corner, Ed caught sight of a blue truck parked by the lake. First a Silver Pinnacle van, he thought, now a truck. He could only guess as to what that truck contained.

Unusually, he’d been granted two hours of free will by the device, permitted to wander empty snowbound plains dotted with low shrubs. He’d no clue where he was but was certainly near
La Loche’s radio station. Mike was sure this lifestyle would drive him mad – no, he was already mad. “I should be dead already!” he exclaimed to nobody. He’d done all the sane things possible: keeping his clothes from tearing further; finding food and water; trying to talk to strangers, and he’d only succeeded with two of them.

Mike slipped on a snowbank and rolled down a shallow incline that ended at a small stream. “Water!” he cried as he scooped water with his hands into his mouth. Moments later, he heard the thumping of helicopter rotors. Better be help, he hoped. The drone grew louder, and eventually he saw the helicopter of commercial build clearly in the distance. As it drew closer, his face paled and his legs carried him away. The helicopter was blue.

A loud voice boomed from the helicopter, from loudspeakers presumably. “Mr. Waterfield,” it blared, “stop right there or we’ll use lethal force.”

He kept running, fleeing the river as the pock pock pock of gunfire from someone shooting a machine gun from an open door blasted water into the air. He stopped and turned, shouting, “What do you want from me you bastards?!” The reply was another round of blazing bullets skirting about him. Again, he sprinted, now with a little more hope that the gunner today was not from Silver Pinnacle’s specially trained army of soldiers. With the pock pock pock blowing snow off the ground, he kept running, thinking of all his regrets in life. The move to Buffalo Narrows was the biggest one. Why did I move from Saskatoon? Mike wondered. I escaped from one hell to another –

The plains and the helicopter dissolved before him as pins and needles assaulted his fragile skin – a definite sign he was in a broadcast. He tripped and found himself sprawled flat on the ground at the edge of a road cutting through a forest.

Far away, the sound of men shouting orders at each other cut through the frosty air, scaring the few birds perched in the trees. They’re near, he knew, and I’m going to get the Swiss
cheese treatment from the Silver Pinnacle guns if I don’t keep running. He picked himself up and, fighting exhaustion and fatigue, scampered into the forest.

The Cabin (III)

12:30pm

The drive was relaxing enough to take Ed’s mind off Silver Pinnacle. The trees and nearby mountains stole the view for most of the time and they even found another town on their way north. The Andersons stopped there, a place called Descharme Lake, and had a refreshing brunch. Eventually, they made their way back to the log cabin by noon, and Ed was back into investigative mode as he saw small squads of men and women half-marching in and out of the forest on the drive back. They could’ve passed as game hunters in their generic khaki outfits but all of them wore the same blue armbands and helmets. Back at their residence, the family had fruit salad and yoghurt before plans for the rest of the day were drawn up.

Neil and Isabelle made it obvious to Sally and Ed how badly they wanted to visit a small hotel casino at Turnor Lake to the west. While they intended to have dinner there too, the parents were really dying to go to try out the little casino in the hotel. “We can’t go,” Sally groaned. “We’re underage.”

“I’m not,” Ed said, but not because he wanted to go, only because even his parents would sometimes forget that their son was not exactly a youngster any more.

Neil nodded, realising he’d overlooked that aspect of the hotel. “Well, we can’t take you I guess, Sally.”

“I’m sure Ed is old enough to look after her and himself,” Isabelle suggested.
The children looked at each other. “I suppose that’ll have to be the case,” replied Ed with a small smile.

And so that was the case indeed. The family had more lunch together before the parents dressed themselves a little more fashionably and drove off for Turnor Lake, Ed and Sally standing at the front door waving goodbye. This wasn’t an uncommon situation for either member of the family, and the children knew their parents weren’t serious gamblers, and sensible enough not to fall into debt. They were just the types who wanted to experience everything. Leaving the children alone on holiday was a first though but it didn’t deter Ed or Sally from getting on with their newfound mission. If Mike arrived before their parents came back around half past seven, Sally’s laptop would already be out and Ed’s handwritten list of questions would remind him of the things to ask about. But with Silver Pinnacle hunters swarming the whole woods, maybe last night was Mike’s last public appearance.

The Broadcasted Man (II)

4:56pm

Someone rapped at Ed’s window. Opening the curtains, he saw Mike shivering outside, a mild snowstorm building in the darkening skies. “Sally, get the door!” he ordered.

The children repeated last night’s drill: warm blankets, hot water and sandwiches for Mike.

Straight after that, before their acquaintance could say “Thank you,” Sally was on her laptop, tapping furiously at her keyboard. Still confident it would take ten minutes or less, she proceeded to untangle the programming to rectify the randomisation function in her mystical but technical way.

“I hope I don’t disappear before you’re done,” the Broadcasted Man said.
With his sister busy, Ed busied himself with the prepared questions but didn’t need to progress any further than the first two before Mike decided to tell everything he knew.

Tugging the blankets, he began. “If you read the newspapers about me,” – Ed nodded – “you’ll recall I used to live in Saskatoon. Three years I was there. Those were great days, working at an avionics firm based at the airport. Huh, and Saskatoon was where I met and married Sarah, my wonderful wife. We, back then, lived the life of any average well-off couple you could say. Only for so long…

“Only a year and a bit after our wedding, she was on her way to work – her line of work was teaching at the primary school in town. Well,” – tears gathered in Mike’s eyes – “I was busy filling out some papers for a faulty fuse on an airliner when the police called me. ‘There’s been an accident with your wife,’ they said in their monotone way – I don’t understand why they do it because it never helps. ‘Is she alright?’ I cried. There was a long pause, then, ‘I’m sorry Mr. Waterfield. A big rig careened into the outbound lane and hit her car head on. I’m sorry sir.’ Another pause. ‘She’s dead.’ And yes, it was the truth.”

Sally stopped typing and tears dribbled down her cheeks. Unable to help overhearing the heartrending tragedy, emotion overcame her. Mike stuttered unintelligibly before exploding into a crying fit. Ed’s eyes watered too, but he recovered and attempted to calm Mike. He didn’t have to, because he quickly changed mood. His hands closed into fists, his teeth clenched together, and he growled through a weary, fatigued face, “And so I made the greatest error of my living life. Saskatoon had become a nightmare city, haunted by Sarah’s passing, a life cut short too soon. I fled the town a month later, and ended up in a world of deception of even greater horror!” A fist crashed down to the table.

Sally’s tears were spent and her fingers tapped away again, resolving the device’s programming. Ed asked, “How was the move a mistake?”

• 30 •
“I should’ve stayed in Saskatoon! Or maybe have gone somewhere else. But no, I ended up with Silver Pinnacle in Buffalo Narrows where the real hell was! How could I have known evil lay behind the company’s walls?”

“You couldn’t,” Ed said. “It’s not a mistake if that’s so. C’mon, calm down. We’re here to help you Mike.”

He took a minute’s pause before resuming. “So, I moved to Buffalo Narrows. It was the nearest town to the R&D facility of my newest employer, Silver Pinnacle Technologies. The CEO – de Marignac was his name – was impressed by my résumé and my mathematical and scientific prowess. I became Assistant Director of Finance but I wasn’t restricted from advising other Departments with ideas for the stuff they were inventing there. Before my ‘disappearance’ the Geology Department was busy refining methods to extract rare earth elements from certain ores, and the Photonics Department had begun experiments in quantum computing – I won’t explain them in detail, it’s not important.

“As the months ticked by, I came across small inconsistencies with the company’s financial statements. I brought the matter up at one meeting with the Board of Directors and CEOs only to receive cold stares. Suspicious I was about the matter and in the days leading to my ‘disappearance’ I unveiled, working under complete secrecy, a massive financial scandal. Silver Pinnacle was stealthily siphoning money from government firms to fund the company. I did the calculations and determined that it was too much money just to cover the projects I knew about. The money had to have been going to off-the-record projects so I tried digging further. In due course, I found plans by de Marignac and the Board to sabotage a rival corporation in Vancouver.”

Mike paused for a breath. “So what did you do?” Sally asked impatiently.

“I’m a law-abiding Canadian for the most part, I think, and considered calling the police. But deep down, my heart told me to take the matter into my own hands. There and then, that
Thursday afternoon last month, I decided to confront de Marignac.” He paused again, wiping imaginary sweat from his forehead. “I knew the risks I was exposing myself to, but I marched onward. That turned out to be another mistake on my part.

“I walked into de Marignac’s office with my briefcase full of incriminating papers. ‘Sir, what the hell are you doing behind my back?’ I demanded. I read aloud the documents’ contents, and he just sat there, unfazed. He called for security on his office radio and moments later, before I could protest, two uniformed men slammed the doors and handcuffed me.

“De Marignac stood unwaveringly. ‘Monsieur Waterfield,’ he gloated, ‘I applaud your inquisitive mind and its ability to untangle tall tale from truth, but you have no right to know of such truths.’ To my horror, he removed an old Colt from under his desk and casually aimed between my eyes, almost point blank. He kept the pistol there for a while, hesitating whether to kill, before telling me, ‘I would kill you, confrère, but I believe there may be a place to redeem yourself. You must answer this question first: will you help me or will I shoot you?’ Valuing life, I chose the first option. I had no idea what was in store for me as de Marignac said a quiet word to the guards who knocked me out cold.”

Again, Mike paused for a moment, now rubbing his temples. His head winced as if the memory came back to him, the swift pain of the blow. “I awoke in a plain-white room with a rudimentary bed, a chair, a desk and a stainless steel door. I was surprised to see I had a private bathroom – not a big one but surprising nonetheless – and everything was pristinely clean. I scrutinised every inch of the room but couldn’t find any spyware. Then, a guard burst through the door and strapped me down into a wheelchair. Rolling down grey corridors – underground I assumed, since I’d not seen such a place in any of Silver Pinnacle’s buildings – the guard left me in another room set up to look like a hospital’s operating theatre. And it was precisely that, not a trick at all. People in white and green gowns pressed a mask to my face and the world went black again – an anaesthetic, I assume. I woke up, twelve hours later
they said, and they’d surgically inserted the teleporting device in my head. The project’s
leader, Walter West – that betraying bastard, a person I thought was my best work friend at
the company – then explained what he planned to do with me.”

*Walter West*, wondered Ed. The guy who ‘found’ Mike’s body frozen in the forest, so said
the papers.

“And so for three arduous weeks,” – Mike’s teeth clenched hard – “under the command of
controllers and computers, I was teleported all over the secret part of the R&D facility. All
routes of access to the outside were guarded so well that no-one bothered to lock my cell’s
door. Every teleportation was done through a steel radio tower built in the largest room, and
every time it was tortuous pain. The work was driving me up the wall, the anguish of being a
guinea pig. I couldn’t handle being in their hands. I wanted to get out.

“So one day, when the personnel were on a lunch break, I escaped my cell with the intent of
suicide. I considered several methods, but the tools to do them weren’t available. I decided to
try for the tower’s electrical generator. I got there undetected except for the two technicians
mooching near the apparatus. I dodged them and ripped apart the generator’s wires and
grabbed some live ends. All I remember of that moment was violently shaking before
blackout.”

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“And that’s when I woke up in the space that turned to fire.” Mike drew another breath before
grabbing another sandwich.

“Done!” Sally shouted. “I can’t get anywhere with the hidden coding, but the randomisation
function is gone.”

Mike scampered to the little girl at her laptop. “Really?” he cried.

“Yeah,” she confidently replied. “To replace the resultant gap in the programming, I’ve
synced it with my laptop so teleportation can only happen at my command.”
In a moment of joy, Mike almost crushed Sally in a bear hug and did the same to Ed. “Oh, how can I thank you both! Thank you, thank you!” Slamming her laptop, Sally then asked, “What’re you going to do now?” Mike’s happiness evaporated suddenly. “Damn,” he stammered. “They’re still after me, aren’t they?” “Afraid so Mike,” Ed answered. “I’ve seen their vehicles and personnel combing this place.” “They’ve already come close to getting me. Have they been here yet? In this cabin?” “Not really.” Mike sighed with relief. “I guess I can hide out here until I can make a plan. Do your parents know about me?” “Nope,” Sally responded. “Good. Where are they now?” “Some place called Turnor Lake. They’re not back for another few hours.” Mike clapped his hands. “Can I stay here for the moment?” he asked. “Maybe when they return, I can run off and make my way wherever that way is.” The children nodded. “No problem,” Ed said.

The Cabin (IV)

7:28pm

Neil and Isabelle returned amid a blizzard far more vicious than anything La Loche had encountered in three decades. Despite the whiteout conditions, the car didn’t crash into the log cabin as it struggled down the snow-encrusted driveway. Strolling in slightly drunk – uncommon for either parent – they waved to Ed and Sally and told them about the five-star
food and vibrant atmosphere of the hotel and casino. Both acknowledged they were tired and, ten minutes later, signed off for the day with “Merry Christmas!” and went to bed.

During the parents’ conscious presence, Mike, wrapped in spare blankets, hid in a hole dug by Sally into a thick snowdrift. He was relieved to not wait there long when Ed gave him the all-clear signal. In the few hours he’d been at the Andersons’ cabin, he’d decided that when the time was right, he’d make a dash to the La Loche Police Station. The children gave him a map and some directions on how to get there.

Walking back into the warm cabin, he wondered aloud, “Now how am I going to get to La Loche unnoticed?”

**Clearwater River (II)**

7:34pm

“Why didn’t you think of that before, woman?!”

The short-haired lady at the bank of computers inside the Silver Pinnacle truck parked by the lake shrunk under the presence of the French Chairman and the Teleport Radio Relay Project Director behind her. “I’m sorry sir,” she sheepishly responded, “but we thought the GPS in the device was fried.”

“Zut alors!” Chairman and CEO Pierre de Marignac of Silver Pinnacle Technologies burst out angrily, stomping up and down the high-tech truck’s interior. A blip appeared on a projected map, its image reflecting off de Marignac’s glasses.

Project Director Walter West pointed. “See?” he hissed. “There he is!”

“Tell Companies Rubis and Rouge to converge there at once!” de Marignac snapped.
“I shall attend to it immediately, sir.” The lady speedily snatched a radio unit and gave the master’s command.

De Marignac and West departed the truck and made for the Bugatti. “Driver,” ordered de Marignac, “head for the Hendley Winter Tourism Property. I want to witness the takedown. Monsieur Waterfield has cost me too much money already. Oh, but the wait is probably worth it.”
Part IV: The Confrontation
“I don’t think walking would be a good idea in that horrible storm,” Ed remarked. “You’ll have to wait for it to blow over.”

“Great,” Mike moaned. “Maybe I can borrow your parents’ car.”

“Uh-uh,” Sally grunted. “Mum and Dad keep the keys in their room, and they lock their room when they’re asleep.”

Mike, now feeling stronger after a good meal and also wearing the children’s unloved snow gear in place of his decrepit business attire, punched his arm in defeat. “Looks like I’ll have to wait.”

“Wait!” Sally grabbed her laptop. “I can get you broadcasted to your destination.”

Ed’s fingers clicked. “Indeed, it’s the fastest way out.”

Mike scratched his chin. “Not exactly. You could do it but there are two things. First, every broadcast puts me in absolute pain, but I’ve endured a lot of that so that’s not my biggest issue. The second point is the main problem.”

“What?” the children said.

“The radio tower at La Loche is too far from where I want to go – Buffalo Narrows. To get there, I’d imagine that the tower has to be running on extreme amounts of power to teleport me.”

Minutes later, a set of headlights poked through the living room windows. The trio crouched behind the nearest window sill. A blue jeep rumbled into the driveway, unloading a blue-uniformed group of five – three men and two women – who arranged themselves around the driveway, their faces obscured by thick black helmets with lenses protruding from them.

Each soldier cradled a bolt-action rifle with a silencer.
“How’d they find us?” Ed gasped.

Mike uttered a foul word. “The device!” he hissed. “There’s a GPS in it. That’s how they did it.”

“GPS?” Sally wondered. “I didn’t see that in the device coding. Must have been one of those hidden codes. As I’ve said, it’s cleverly designed and safeguarded.”

One of the soldiers slowly crept towards the front door, rifle leading the way. “The back door!” Mike urged.

Silently, the threesome crossed the living room to reach the back, Sally shoving her laptop into a soft bag. They hastily donned several jackets, socks and boots hung nearby before Mike opened the door. Without a moment to lose, they hurried into the whiteout.

The soldier reached the front and peeked through a window. She then ordered the two nearest soldiers to scout the back. Twenty seconds later, the report came in: three sets of tracks were in the snow, two minutes old. “So the target has accomplices,” she mumbled. “That wasn’t in the brief.” Toggling her helmet radio, she called the controller in the Clearwater River truck.

“Command, Rubis Leader speaking. The target is on the run with two accomplices, repeat, two accomplices. Where’d they come from?”

“Rubis Leader, Command here. This is news to us. For the time being, apprehend them, but the original target’s orders still stand: if unable to detain, kill.”

In the forest’s deep snow, maintaining even walking pace was tiring. The cold, tearing wind penetrated the trio’s multiple layers of clothes, and their faces and hands numbed within seconds. Nothing was in their favour. Mike turned. “We can’t go on like this,” he shouted, competing with the howling wind. “Those tracks will lead straight to us.”

“Hide!” Ed cried. “May as well try!”
The trio parted ways and quickly buried themselves in snow by the trees. Before closing off their pits, they threw snow onto their footprints to try and hide their movements. A minute passed and, through little peepholes in the snow, they watched as Silver Pinnacle’s finest shrugged at each other before returning to the cabin.

Mike dug himself out, signalling to the children to flee too. The cold burials had sapped their energy tremendously but they pushed on away from the cabin.

There was no turning back.

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On the log cabin’s driveway, things weren’t going well. “What?!” a snow-coated West standing alongside a fuming de Marignac – steam spouted from the Frenchman’s head – screamed at the Company Rubis soldiers.

“They escaped.” The Rubis Leader’s head drooped in resignation.

De Marignac’s fury wasn’t quelled by the intense cold. “Are you all stupid?” he ranted.

“What sucks now is that Monsieur Waterfield has two unknown helpers and that you’ve already reached a cul-de-sac in your pursuit. Is incompetence suddenly in fashion?”

His driver ran up to him from the car. “Sir, Command still has a track on the target. They’re at the lake.”

“There’s still hope then.” The Chairman and CEO ambled back to his car. “Company Rouge had better deliver the coup de grâce.”
Covered in fine powder and close to hypothermia, Ed, Sally and Mike shuffled onto the icy coast of the frozen Lac La Loche. “This is one Christmas we’ll never forget,” Ed panted. “Yeah,” Sally gasped, “if we’re still alive by tomorrow.” “We can get to the village still.” Mike gazed down the coast. “The lakeside touches La Loche. Let’s follow it.”

Again, they were on the move, but not for long. A burly humming noise broke through the shrieking blizzard. Searchlights shot through the white gloom and the children dived into deep snow by the trees. For Mike, the spotlight caught him. A hovercraft crawled over the ice and halted by his side. Two soldiers from the crew handcuffed him and reported the capture on their helmet radios. The children could only watch on in horror. Ed was immediately disheartened. Worse, he and Sally were now technically fugitives.

Sally’s disappointment ended when she felt her laptop by her side. With the soldiers occupied with Mike, she positioned herself behind the tree nearest to Mike and opened the laptop. The cold had almost drained the battery and only had enough power for a few minutes. Ed was entirely unaware of where Sally had gone, and of her plan. The computer still held the connection to Mike’s device, but she couldn’t use the La Loche radio tower. Besides, its signal here was weak. She ran a new scan of the airwaves – and grinned.

“This is Rouge Leader to Command, we have him alive.”

“Good on you, Rouge. What of the two accomplices?”

The Rouge Leader looked at the treeline. “Nothing, but they’ll freeze to death out here.”
Mike was manhandled into the hovercraft as more soldiers and a tall redhead in a brown greatcoat emerged from the white gloom. “I simply had to come and see you here, Michael,” the tall man said behind frosted glasses. “You’ve wasted my time, money and resources. We had your body shoved into experimental freezers to fake your hypothermic death which, I may add, the police believed. I thought you were dead but no. We were suspicious when no bone fragments were in the ashes. You’re at an impasse now, and we won’t fail after this much effort.”

“You can’t hide everything for much longer, you snail-eating swine!” Mike shrieked. 

De Marignac failed to react. “What about your accomplices, eh?”

Goodness gracious! Ed and Sally. Where were they? Mike wondered. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Pah, it doesn’t matter,” de Marignac said with a dismissive wave of a hand. “They’ll freeze – eh, what?”

The painful feeling of pins attacked Mike. The soldiers around him did double takes at him. Suddenly, he knew what was happening. The look on de Marignac was priceless.

“No!” de Marignac cried. “Don’t you dare disappear on me now!”

The snowy world of Lac La Loche began to fade from vision. Mike waved a farewell to de Marignac, smiling at the furious Chairman of Silver Pinnacle Technologies.

“Shoot him!” de Marignac wailed. “Shoot, you bastards!”

Silenced rifles went off but the bullets passed through Mike harmlessly as he melted into the blizzard.

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Sally managed a grin when she saw the crazy Frenchman called de Marignac shout obscene curses at his people. After lengthy French insults and nonsense, de Marignac appeared to talk
to someone on a hidden radio in his greatcoat. “Command,” he yelled, “Monsieur Waterfield’s been broadcasted away. Track him now!”

The Frenchman listened to the response and then violently punched one of the soldiers who panicked and instinctively shot de Marignac’s foot. He yelped like a girl, his glasses flying through the air and shattering on the lake ice, greatcoat fluttering madly in the wind. “He’s in Buffalo Narrows! How?!”

Sally shut her laptop resoundingly. Only a command centre by Silver Pinnacle would use ridiculous amounts of current to run radio coverage.

With the soldiers in a mess and de Marignac’s foot bleeding profusely, she dug Ed out. “Let’s go,” she begged.

Quickly, the two children dashed back to the cabin. Watching from the windows of their darkened rooms, they watched the jeep and the soldiers vanish into the storm. “Mike will make it,” Sally remarked.

It looked like Christmas was going to be bright.

Back

8:08pm

A shivering, snow-covered man wearing God-knows-how-many clothes stumbled into the tiny foyer where a policeman attended the reception desk. “Uh, can I help?” the startled policeman muttered.

“Mark Sharp, it’s you!” the man cried. “Remember me?”

Mark studied the crazy man’s face. “What…?” he gasped.

“It’s me Mark!” the man exclaimed. “I’m not dead!”
Mark Sharp stood in astonishment. “God… Michael!”

“Yes indeed,” Mike said. “Please, arrest Silver Pinnacle. Put me under protection from them too, please! They’re after me still!”

Mark made some phone calls before returning to Mike. “Michael, where the hell have you been?”

“Taken prisoner at the facility for weeks now.”

“Goodness gracious!” Mark wiped his brow before offering Mike his cup of coffee. “Thanks.” Mike downed it completely. “It’s great to be back in Buffalo Narrows.” And thank you Sally and Ed, he thought, for broadcasting me out of La Loche.
No Christmas Party for Silver Pinnacle: Fraud and Kidnapping Charges to be Pressed

Christmas Day began with professional investigators and heavily-armed police from Saskatoon storming Silver Pinnacle Technologies, analysing the company’s fraudulent finance records, and arresting the Board of Directors and Chairman Pierre de Marignac. The tipoff about Silver Pinnacle occurred last night when Michael Waterfield, presumed dead last week, stumbled into the Buffalo Narrows Police Station, claiming that he’d been held prisoner by de Marignac after noticing the company’s dodgy finance.

Investigators attempted to locate the areas that Waterfield claimed to have been held in but Silver Pinnacle personnel torched the rooms, destroying evidence of their activities there. More arrests were made as a result.

Waterfield described his captivity for the last four weeks, including the surgical implanting of a GPS tracker in his head, a claim verified by x-ray scans late this morning. “It was hell,” Waterfield told reporters. “They had me as a guinea pig for experiments and harassed me constantly. I escaped by luck when they’d left a few doors unlocked, allowing me to make a run for it.”
For Silver Pinnacle, this spells the end of the once highly-acclaimed business. For Waterfield, a welcome-back Christmas party will be held for him by the Buffalo Narrows residents in the Town Hall this evening. While de Marignac will be eating Spam behind bars tonight, Waterfield can finally enjoy a fresh turkey.
The atmosphere was lively in the Buffalo Narrows Town Hall. Three hundred of the town’s residents chatted excitedly to each other as light music played through the wood-panelled function room. The talk stopped for a few minutes as the Mayor took the stage and delivered a word of condolence to Michael Waterfield who promptly joined him in receiving a gift and massive applause.

“Poor man,” Isabelle remarked.

“I don’t even know him but I sympathise with him already,” Neil said sombrely.

When word got out that a Christmas dinner for Mike was being held, it took a lot of convincing by the children to drive all the way to Buffalo Narrows. It was as if they knew him.

Eventually, the man himself shook hands with the Anderson parents. The children pretended to meet Mike for the first time, an act that the man picked up immediately. “You have such wonderful kids,” Mike told the parents. “They’ll turn out as strong leaders in the days to come.”

“Why, thanks,” Isabelle replied.

A few minutes later, Mike and the children peeled off to a quiet corner. “Ed, Sally,” he said tearfully, “I can’t thank you enough.” He hugged both of them. “Good news is that I’m getting that device removed from my head in a few days. When that happens, I’ll be a free man once again.”

Ed smiled. “So, what’s the plan for the future?”
Mike wiped his tears away. “Well, I guess the whole affair has helped me move on with life I guess. I’ll have to find a new job, of course, but maybe I should get married again. What do you think?”

The children shrugged. “Up to you,” Sally answered.

Mike patted both of them on the shoulder. “I’d sure like to meet you again in the future. Maybe take a trip to Australia and see you.”

Sally laughed. “Just get along with Mum and Dad and it’s guaranteed.”

“I guess I’ll let you both go. There’s a lot of worried folks here that want to speak to me. In any case, Merry Christmas to you and your parents!” With that, Sally and Ed took off into the crowd to find Neil and Isabelle. Mike watched on, smiling for the first real time since his wife’s death. He felt stronger than ever as he mingled with the crowd, now sure that life could only get better.

--- THE END ---
It all began on a dark and stormy night. Francesca met the boy of her dreams, love at first sight—
you get the gist… girl meets boy, they fall in love and live happily ever after. No! Not another angsty
“he loves me, he loves me not” story, you’re thinking.
BLEAGH!
Be grateful; it isn’t that kind of story. So, on our fabled dark and stormy night, a girl is kidnapped
and brutally murdered. No! Scratch that, you’ve heard it all before.
BLOOD AND GUTS!
Let’s try again. It was a bright, sunny day. The meadow was filled with golden, yellow daffodils.
There was a soft breeze, gently shuffling them. She lay there, when suddenly an angel appeared to
make all her dreams come true. On one condition. That she board the Titanic… All right, she falls in
love, and then wakes up just as she was taking her final breath. Turns out it was all a dream.
LAME!
Okay! I’m far more creative than that! If I start a story, I finish it properly, not like that author...
Not mentioning any names for legal reasons (Don’t want to be sued)
Here comes the real start of the story. Are you ready? Anticipating my every word? Okay… Here
goes nothing. But Houston, we have a problem. My pencil lead just broke.

Back with a nice sharpened 2H pencil. Hopefully you’re prepared to read, because even if you
aren’t, away the story goes.

It was a particularly normal day for Jessie. Not dark and stormy, not bright and sunny, just the
usual clouds. The only strange thing was a dream she’d had the previous night. She put on her drab
school uniform, like nine hundred and ninety-nine other students from Mount Carmel School were
doing at that exact moment. As per usual, she caught the bus to school, whereupon she discovered
something out of the ordinary. The entire grade seven bag rack was smouldering. There had been a
fire.

She wondered what on earth had started it, and was rather glad that her own backpack had not
burned to ashes. Jessie headed towards the oval, as was custom in any such emergency situation. As
soon as she set foot on the earth (bare of grass, as primary school sports fields generally are), Jessie
felt her back start to itch. Badly. But she resisted scratching – she knew that it was in that exact spot
she couldn’t reach. She abruptly came to a halt. She had been preoccupied with her back, but now
she noticed something else that was rather odd. All the students seemed to be able to fly. They had
wings.

_No, snap out of it, Jessie thought to herself. I must have stayed up far too late doing that History
assignment._ She shut her eyes and tightened her closed lids. Then she opened them, but the wings
were still there and nobody was paying the shrivelled bag racks any attention whatsoever.

Still believing she was dreaming, Jessie, flightless, spotted her friend Prue, who was levitating
with silky falcon wings. She walked up to her. “What in the world is going on?” she questioned.
However, the only reply she got was, “No idea, but you might want to turn around,” Wide-eyed,
Jessie turned, realising that she had, no; she couldn’t have – penguin wings. Perhaps that was what
caused the itching sensation. But this was so unfair. Everyone else got perfectly functional flappers,
and she got hers from a flightless fur-ball. Feeling very much alone, Jessie tried the library. But things
were out of sorts there too. The librarians all had wings of their own and were adjusting the
bookshelves to a height more convenient for those with the gift of flight.
So, her day was turning out to be pretty dismal. Oh, how on earth had this happened? And when would it return to normal?

_Hmph_, thought Jessie. No one seemed to know what exactly was going on, but they were all having the time of their lives. She was the only person even vaguely interested in trying to find out how everyone had gotten wings and how to reverse the enchantment, if an enchantment it was.

So, her journey began. Jessie packed food and clothing for weeks of travel. She crossed chasms, climbed mountains and trudged across the countryside, trying to find any sort of clue as to why her life had been abruptly turned upside down.

Okay, no, she didn’t. She returned home, by foot, given that she’d already spent her bus fare. Her parents were at work, so they wouldn’t yet know anything was amiss and she didn’t want to disturb them. She made her way to her bedroom, the one place everything seemed normal, and fell face down on the bed. She didn’t feel heroic, like storybook characters. No, not at all. She didn’t feel mighty and strong like the protagonists in movies, either. This was the first time anything interesting had happened in her life. Contrary to how she’d always imagined this moment, all she wanted to do was cry, sleep and forget about the mysteries of the day. Soon, though, she came to the realisation that penguins must find sleeping very awkward.

And she woke up and it was all a dream. Ouch, after all we’ve been through. All right, all right – I was kidding. She woke up and... was inspired to go on a great journey. Jessie set out towards the forest at the edge of town. She didn’t really know why, but she’d always been a little spooked out by it. Perhaps the magic of the current enigma had begun there?

Climbing the tallest tree she could find, Jessie leaned against a branch, poking her head out of the foliage. She soon realised that all was not well in the forest either. Every creature which rightfully should have had wings was hopping or crawling along the ground. The balance of the entire ecosystem had been shifted. Something had to be done. But how on earth was one twelve-year-old supposed to work on something so ineffably, drastically large?

Suddenly, from her high vantage point, Jessie noticed a clearing. And within that clearing was... absolutely nothing! Anti-climax, right? But wait... out of the corner of her eye she could just see a giant bubbling pot. And three witches chanting... hmmmm no – a bit too Macbeth-y. No, she saw something even more unusual – a giant hole. Perhaps it was the opening to a tunnel. This could point to an evil plan to take over the entire world. Maybe not. Taking over the world has been done too many times before. Okay, how about a plot to create a money tree by tipping the balance a bit? Yes, that could work. And the money would buy them ultimate power. So, yeah, still taking over the world being the end goal. But the incredible, the fabulous, the amazing – money tree- would be the method.

_Mwoohahahaha!_ (Evil laughter)

Out of the hole came something rather unusual. It’s a bird, it’s a plane, no it’s a giant levitating shoe..._WHAT_?!? Could this day get any weirder?

To fight the shoe, or not fight the shoe, that is the question. An answer came far too soon, given it was the wrong one. She had no weapons. The best option - scarper, as quick as look at you, in the opposite direction. Here we go!

Jessie was stirred into action. And she trips; falls. Jessie had kind of forgotten that she was at the top of a tree. Plummeting down, hitting pretty much every branch, Jessie wondered if there was truly someone (or something) out to get her – perhaps fate?
She waited, watched. Okay, so now the shoe was gone. Did I mention that it was a fluorescent green converse the size of a Mini Cooper vehicle? I think I forgot that detail in the initial description. But Jessie was frightfully dreadful at keeping quiet. The shoe was very much still there when Jessie crept from her hiding place.

Jessie walked to investigate the tunnel mouth. She kept on thinking that she saw movement from the corner of her eye. It was the shoe, playing that ‘I will stay directly behind you’ game. Jessie had had enough. She whirled around and caught a shoelace between her teeth. The shoe’s expression – if indeed a shoe can have an expression – was like that of a guilty dog: *I know I’ve done something wrong, please forgive me!*

To her astonishment, Jessie found herself playing chase-y with the shoe creature. Although that did turn out to be a bit unfair, given that the shoe could go at turbo-speed.

Befriending a shoe, Jessie, the flightless penguin-bird-human, was feeling pretty chuffed with herself. “Okay, levitating converse, take me to where this tunnel lets out.” Demanding a giant shoe to do her bidding? What next?

Jessie leaped into the back of the shoe. ZZOOM, ZZOOMMM~~~~~~~~ The shoe was fast as they rocketed through dark, dank smelling passages. Okay, yes they were underground, but the passages weren’t actually dark or dank smelling. Instead, Jessie and the converse were flying through a never-ending tiled passage – like some secret facility was up ahead, that strangely smelt of some form of frangipani air freshener.

After a short while, they emerged back above ground, or so Jessie thought. But she was wrong. No, they were in a humongous football field sized underground cavern, with a holographic sun and cloud filled sky. In the centre of her vision was a tree, the size of skyscraper, with a perfectly circular hollow, a perfect size for a person to fit through.And on the thin, stick-like branches of that tree were... leaves. Just leaves. Nothing particularly exciting – no money, jewels, riches, no, just plain green leaves. It was quite a shock for Jessie to see something so ordinary in her upside-down world.

But wait – the leaves were rapidly turning a bright shade of pink. Turns out they weren’t leaves at all. They were chameleons! What? How did that happen? Can’t chameleons only change to the colour of their surroundings?

Chameleons with a plot to take over the world? A helpful fluoro green converse? Oh dear!

How was Jessie to stop the malevolent chameleons from world domination? She had no idea. But she had to get away from the chameleons right now. Back down the tunnel. “Mush, giant converse, MUSH!”

Jessie, safely back above ground, thought and thought. How to stop chameleons? Jessie wondered if there was any other entrance to the EVIL LAIR. She would have to investigate. And how were the chameleons going to go about magic-ing up a money tree? They’d probably need some sort of power source. But what would that be? An enigma it was.

Running down the passage without the shoe, Jessie was nervous. Upon returning, she had left the fluoro green converse behind, in hope of being a little less conspicuous. But now, alone – Jessie was not feeling so confident.

Often, in the act of attempting to be inconspicuous, one becomes automatically conspicuous. Jessie, in the mystically messed up world, even penguin-human as she was, was just too normal. She really stood out to the chameleons, though she hadn’t when riding the converse.
So now, the chameleons had scattered across the cavern and were stampeding towards her. Jessie knew they had magical powers, but, nervous as she was, she instinctively knew she had to hold her ground. Otherwise, the chameleons would chase her to the outside world. Which wouldn’t be good. Scratch that, it would be downright BAD!

The chameleons proceeded to stop, a foot from Jessie’s feet. They had her surrounded. Actually, no, not quite. But the only direction in which she could travel without trampling and angering the evil beings was towards the, now bare, central tree.

She headed towards it. Obviously it was what the chameleons wanted her to do. Could the tree be their power source? It seemed to be the only object anywhere near normal in the cavern. As she proceeded to circumnavigate the tree, it did something rather odd. A wooden arm shot from the trunk, throttling Jessie. Okay, I take back that comment about it being almost normal. Because it wasn’t.

What was Jessie to do with the bark binding her throat? She could fairly say that this was the weirdest situation she’d ever encountered. To her astonishment, the tree pulled her into its hollow. She hadn’t realised it was so vast from the outside. Maybe this was the real entrance to the chameleons’ secret lair? Insert foreboding music here.

The tree plonked her down into a chair that appeared to be part of the tree itself. Strange. Having no choice but to sit, Jessie wondered how she’d get out of this pickle. Her answer came almost immediately – to her relief, the green converse came bursting through the hollow. Shoe to the rescue! What next?

Jessie, now thankfully above ground, was considering a prospect. If the people who had wings from flying creatures could fly – would she be a really great swimmer, given she had the wings of a penguin? There was only one way to find out. To the swimming pool!

It turned out that yes; Jessie was a far stronger swimmer than before. Now – how would swimming help in defeating the chameleons? She had an idea, but was unsure of whether chameleons could swim and thus foil her plot.

She did some research on the home computer, given she couldn’t get books from the library. Luckily, it turned out that chameleons could only sort of swim if they were floating on the surface of the water. That sorted out how she would eliminate them, but she’d still need to reverse the enchantment. But, oh, BOTHER! Her plan wouldn’t work, because she’d intended to remove the enchantment before exiting the evil lair. She would then no longer have penguin wings, so she’d have trouble swimming back through the tunnels which she’d been planning to fill with water. She needed a new idea.

Perhaps the shoe would help her? No, she couldn’t rely on it. The mere thought was preposterous. But on a day like this one, maybe preposterous ideas were exactly what she needed. Right, how about gouging out more earth to make a larger tunnel? For then Jessie could submerge the entire cavern, but have breath enough after fixing the world, to return to the surface. It sounded like a plan, through very sketchy at best. First – how to enlarge the tunnel? Second – where was the power source? Third – how would she undo the enchantment? And fourth – worse – would everyone blame her for removing their wings – even for the sake of the world?

Before tunnelling and creating suspicion, Jessie needed to further investigate the power source. Could it be the tree after all? Maybe she could just blow the whole thing up with dynamite. But that may not reverse the enchantment, would leave a giant hole and would be murder of innocent
chameleons. Well, okay, maybe not innocent – but I think Jessie soon ruled out that option. Not enough potential gain. She admitted to herself that she needed help. And not just from a fluoro converse. No – Real Help – that of a person.

Jessie had made up her mind. She headed back to school and found Prue. The initial excitement from the wings was wearing off, and everything was returning to *almost* normal. The dreary routine of the school day was showing its face. So Prue was most glad for some distraction. An adventure to save the world from evil chameleons sounded just dandy.

The two winged humans thought about how their talents could possibly help. They each made a list of the other’s abilities and strengths, so as to be modest and not boast at all. Of course, first on Prue’s Jessie list was her Supreme Intellect! On the top of the Prue list was her Kindness and her Astonishing Ability of Quick Thinking. Prue was good when pressed for time, while Jessie didn’t exactly know the definition of the word deadline...

**The Lists**

Jessie:
- Supreme Intellect
- Humour
- Eccentricity
- Slight narcissist
- Some obsessive compulsive behaviour
- Thinks before acting
- Swimming (penguin)

Prue:
- Kindness + Quick Thinking
- Hardworking
- Clever
- Thoughtful
- Careful
- Perfectionistic traits
- Flying (falcon)

Even with all these handy attributes, they still had no idea where to start. How would they discover the power source? And if they did succeed in restoring balance, what would happen to the converse? Jessie had grown quite fond of the levitating shoe.

Jessie and Prue swapped lists. “Hey! I am NOT a narcissist! I am just simply amazing!”
“Didn’t you just confirm my point? Oh, all right, I’ll replace it with *creative.*”
“Why don’t I add ‘extra concrete’ to your list?”
“Fine – anyway, this doesn’t really matter. First we need to…”

So, off they went, back to the tunnel mouth. Jessie described the situation precisely (as she remembered it) to Prue, to satisfy her engineering personality. They had decided that Prue should venture into the EVIL LAIR alone, given that the chameleons would recognise Jessie from her previous expedition.

Prue, exiting the frangipani scented passageway and entering the cavern, could hardly believe her eyes. But she supposed that it was no weirder than winged humans.

She casually walked towards the tree. Placing her hand on the bark, she knew that something was up. The surface seemed to be vibrating. Just in the nick of time, she realised that it was moulding to her hand, to keep her stuck there.

Right, okay, time to venture into the tree. She climbed through the hollow and looked around for the chair Jessie had mentioned. Instead, she was astonished to see a giant purple gem. This seemed too easy, too obvious. Surely this was not the power source? It should be better protected. Prue cautiously prodded the gem. Nothing really happened. Something was wrong. This was just too easy. And she hadn’t noticed any chameleons on the way in.
Prue clambered out of the hollow once more. Still, there was peace, tranquillity, and an overwhelming lack of chameleons. Where had the despicable creatures gone? Then she considered a terrifying prospect. What if they had already succeeded in creating the money tree? But even still, wouldn’t the power source be hidden? If the power source was destroyed, surely all of their enchantments would disappear? It must be a decoy.

Prue feared that she’d been in the cavern for far too long. She returned through the tunnel with the peculiar purple gem. Maybe they should destroy it and discover whether it was the power source. In that case, their wings would most likely disappear. But if they didn’t? Then there would not be enough power left to right things, even if they could get the chameleons on their side.

Suddenly, a magnificent thought popped into Prue’s head. What if she and Jessie were to use a reversing enchantment themselves? It had to be worth a try. But perhaps finding the chameleons first would be more beneficial. After all, if they did intend on taking over the world...

As she made it back to the surface, Prue was dumbfounded - Jessie was surrounded by chameleons?! And yet, by her expression and body language it seemed she was unafraid.

“Come, Prue! Sorry, I had it all wrong! The chameleons don’t intend any harm at all. They, like us, are trying to mend our broken world!”

“Then what gave us wings, may I ask – if they did not?” questioned Prue. “And who is it attempting world domination?”

So the chameleons reluctantly explained to Prue. She was sceptical at first. “How do we know that you are telling us the truth?”

“A very good question, dear. And one we aren’t going to answer.”

“See, Jessie? They can’t be trusted!” Prue insisted. But Jessie was oblivious to her pleas. “Oh, don’t be such a spoil-sport-worry-wart! I believe them, so that should be enough for you…”

“No! It isn’t. We have no hard evidence that they are on our side. What if – I don’t know – they need human sacrifices or something to create the money tree?”

The chameleons shifted. “What’s this talk of a money tree? We’ve never heard of such a thing. If someone is creating one, we’d be very interested to learn more.”

“Then what about the wings? You do know something about those?” Jessie asked carefully.

“Nothing more than you do.”

“But do you know anything about why this happened?” Prue probed, gesturing at her wings. “Or, for that matter, how to restore things to normal?”

“See, we thought you had done this and were devising plans against you,” added Jessie.

“Okay – this is the story from our perspective: we saw that humans had gained the ability to fly. We wanted to stop this as soon as possible. You see, humans tend to be fascinated by our incredible camouflaging skills and often catch us to be household pets. We couldn’t think of anything worse! Possession of wings would help humans to capture greater numbers of us – so we need to restore the balance for our own survival!”

“Really?” asked Jessie, “that’s great, because we want to be rid of these wings too! Aside from it being unnatural, having penguin wings myself is a nuisance. It’s just unfair that everyone else should fly, while birds and insects are left as helpless prey for many others. This change will mess with the food chain and destroy our ecosystem!”

Prue was still not entirely convinced. She thought that something didn’t quite fit. “Jessie – what about the world domination plot? Prue asked.

“Well..., um, I don’t think I’ve been entirely truthful with you. I saw the tunnel, and my imagination got the better of me. At first it was just make-believe, but the longer I toyed with the idea, the more realistic it seemed...”
“JESSIE! So what, you lead me on this wild-goose-chase for nothing? I thought your explanations of everything were a bit strange. What else did you make up?”

“Pru-ue, I can’t exactly remember which bits of my story were true and which bits weren’t... But maybe we can’t trust the chameleons, after all. Their tree did try and strangle me...”

“And why do I not remember you mentioning that? You put me in grave danger, sending me down there, without that knowledge! What is the meaning of the defence mechanism, chameleons? And, pray tell, what is this purple gem? I think some more explanations are necessary!” Prue said condescendingly, glaring at Jessie.

“Argh. Okay. This is awkward... Sorry I forgot about that Prue, but you’re alive, so that’s all that counts, right? Anyway, what is this about a purple gem?”

“Hmph. All right, Jessie, I found the gem in the tree. Are you sure you were paying attention when you saw the chair? Chameleons? Defence mechanism and gem?” Prue demanded.

“We have been trying to gather enough power to reverse the spell. That’s what the gem is. Obviously, that would need to be protected.”

“Yes, but how come I was able to waltz in and take it?” Prue asked.

“If there are no chameleons within the cavern, the defence mechanism will shut down, so as not to arouse suspicion,” the chameleons responded.

“That makes sense! I almost left the gem there, because I thought it had to be a decoy. Stealing it was just too easy,” exclaimed Prue.

“So, now the question is: who shifted the balance? And how can we fix it?” Jessie wondered out loud.

“Right. We’re working on that. We haven’t quite figured out who did it – but we know that they are near here – within a 1000 metre radius.”

“Okay, well that is a large area to search. We need to start right away!” Prue exclaimed.

“Time is running out and we don’t know what they’ll do next!” added Jessie, melodramatically.

“Think for a moment. We need to plan our search and do it systematically,” ordered the chameleons.

“Yes, a valid point,” Prue mused. “Should we get more help? And what sort of thing are we actually looking for?”

“We are looking for something that doesn’t seem quite right. And no, don’t get help. We’d spend too long explaining again.”

“B-b-but – how do we find something not quite right, when everything is so messed up?” asked Jessie.

“See – that is what has made this whole mission a tall order,” answered the chameleons.

Without further ado they searched until sundown, finding nothing. They prayed that evil was not afoot. Hopefully, the wing thing was just a mistake.

But, to make this a decent story, of course there was malevolent intent.

Prue woke and immediately went to get Jessie. To her surprise, Jessie wasn’t in bed! Maybe she had been kidnapped! Before presuming anything, Prue thought that she had better check the forest. She found the chameleons. But not Jessie. Prue searched everywhere she could think of, but still no Jessie. She HAD been kidnapped and albeit by the same creatures that had disturbed the balance.

Meanwhile, yes, Jessie had been kidnapped. It was a strange way in which she was being held as, she supposed, a hostage. Jessie was being treated to absolute luxury, worthy of a queen. She thought that she would start calling herself H.R.I.A Jessie I (which stood for Her Royal Ineffable Awesomeness). Narciss! Anyway, she wasn’t worried at all. Having the time of her life, with delicious food and amazing clothes, a spa and a sauna, H.R.I.A was being spoilt rotten. She had completely forgotten about the outside world.
Prue was becoming quite concerned. She thought that the best idea would still be to continue the search for the disturbers of the balance. She and the chameleons searched low and high (as opposed to high and low – it is an extremely different concept!).

Jessie had just had a manicure and a pedicure – and was ready for a massage. If this was what it was like to be a captive, then she loved it. Why hadn’t she been kidnapped before? It was awesome.

Prue and the chameleons had finally found something. They weren’t sure if it would lead them to the despicable balance shifter/s, but at least it was something. Before them was a peculiar looking tree. The bark was knotted and looked sort of shrivelled up – more than what Prue had ever seen before. It could be a major breakthrough. Or it could just be a perfectly normal tree minding its own business... Either way, they needed to find out. Out comes the bobcat. Turns out it was just a tree.

But wait! Hidden between the withered roots was an emerald. The power source? Maybe, but touching it would probably not be a good idea. Surely there would be a sinister defence mechanism? There was only one way to find out. Prue tore a twig from the fallen tree and gave the gem a poke.

A green flash of light lit up the sky. The twig burned and Prue dropped it in fright and pain, scalded by the heat. She wished that Jessie was there, to have one of her ridiculously wacky ideas. One of the chameleons was struck by the gem’s light beam. Its skin sizzled and cracked. They scurried to the nearest water source, a handy stream. Prue doused her hand and the rapidly burning chameleon. The water boiled around it, bubbles rising ominously to the surface. Prue thought for a moment, then jumped in and called for the chameleons to do the same. Surely they’d be less likely to burn alive in a mass of water?

Almost immediately she was proven wrong. She saw a beam heading towards them and quickly jumped from the water, as if she’d been stung. Prue certainly didn’t want to be electrocuted or whatever would happen if she was struck down in the water. Some of the chameleons weren’t quite as fast though, and were poached in the boiling water.

Jessie, after her glorious massage, was led to a secret chamber, where, for the first time, she saw her captor – a huge, blood-red flamingo, aka. The Monstrosity. It showed her a screen. To her horror, she saw Prue and the chameleons being zapped by green light. And they were burning. Perhaps this was how the year seven bag racks had been set alight. Or maybe not – this was a completely different location. The menacing flamingo saw her fear. “Your pitiful friends aren’t coming to save you, so I can do with you as I please.”

“How do I know that this screen isn’t just a simulation?”

“You’ll just have to take my word. It’ll prove true, you see. Your gorgeous friends will die a horrible, slow death for trying to stop me by destroying my power source. But you, dear – I have plans for you, to show you the complete range of my malevolence! And no one can rescue you now!”

An electronic sounding evil laugh echoed off the walls of the room. Clearly, flamingos weren’t adept at laughing, thought Jessie. But it was a lame laugh anyway. She wondered why a bird would mess with the balance to give humans wings and take away birds’ wings.

Jessie peered around the flamingo. She stared at the screen, trying desperately to decide whether or not the image was real. To her surprise, she saw something that made her realise that it was actually happening – not a deception after all. You see, something was being projected that the flamingo would never have shown her. For in the image, a perfectly recognisable shoe had appeared.
Prue and the chameleons were on the verge of panicking. They’d been running to and fro, with no hope of escape from the beam of green light. Then they saw it. The converse Jessie had mentioned was speeding towards them. So, thought Prue, Jessie didn’t make up the shoe. To her astonishment, the light seemed to be void of any effect when it struck the fluorescent converse. It flicked a shoelace. It looked like it was motioning for them to get inside. Gladly, they did. For even if the shoe was despicable evil, it had to be better than being burnt to a crisp – didn’t it?

Jessie was relieved to see that Prue was escaping. The flamingo had not yet noticed that anything was going amiss. Jessie attempted to keep a terrified expression permanently in place. She had to ensure that the blood red creature did not turn around until the chameleons and Prue were safely away from that point. So it was vital that Jessie give the aforementioned bird no hint as to what was occurring behind its red-feathered backside.

“You p-p-power source?” Jessie stuttered. “You mean that – that emerald is your power source?”

“Oh, yes. I had it well hidden, but your moronic friends found it. They’ll never be able to ruin it, though. The defence mechanism is so fabulously intelligently put together, by me of course, that no one, no one, could possibly ever conquer it. I have been using the marvellous emerald for years. I have been making improvements to the balance. In recent years, haven’t you noticed unusual things that you can’t properly explain? They are my doing!” Again the electronic laugh filled the room. Jessie couldn’t help but laugh this time. The flamingo was furious. “You, you’re meant to be cowering in fear. Why are you so confident? Why aren’t you bending to my will?”

But Jessie couldn’t stop laughing. “Even I can do a better evil laugh than you, and I’m not even evil! Also, there is just one thing I’m curious about. Why have you been allowing me such luxuries?”

The flamingo regained its composure. “Oh, it’s all part of my master plan, you see. Think of yourself as a pig on a farm. I have lulled you into a false sense of security and fattened you up. Now is the time to end your pitiful human life and feed you to my minions.”

“Minions? What minions?” Now Jessie was returning to her previous sense of fear. She no longer had to force herself to have a pained, terrified expression.

“Oh,” the flamingo sighed. It was far more comfortable with a scared-to-death captive than a relaxed one. “My minions. Let me tell you about my minion family. It’s made up of all my previous experiments with the balance. Keeping them close teaches me not to make the same mistakes in the future. Would you like to see my most amusing minion?”

Jessie didn’t really have a choice at all. She would certainly be shown, regardless of whether she wished to see it or not. Besides, the concept had spiked her curiosity and creativity. “Take me there, but don’t feed me to your creation. I can be useful to you.”

“Oh? I shall ponder your proposition. Come with me.”

Jessie was extremely glad to be leaving the room. The flamingo had not yet noticed the escape, though Jessie had watched it carefully.

They walked down a passage. This time, it was actually a dark, dank tunnel – though there was a stronger frangipani scent pervading in the gloom. Frangipanis? Hadn’t she smelt them recently? Oh no, she realised – Prue could be in danger! It appeared that the talking chameleons were one of the flamingo’s experiments. Since it was a cruel creature, she wouldn’t be surprised if it had all its innocent creations under lock and key. But something didn’t quite fit. Wouldn’t the chameleons have mentioned this? Surely they would remember a blood red flamingo and their place of imprisonment?

Meanwhile, Prue and the remaining chameleons had absolutely no clue where the fluorescent shoe was transporting them. While relieved to be out of the range of the emerald’s fire, they were
anxious that the converse might have malevolent motivations. Or it might be under the control of another – like perhaps whoever was working on weird-ifying the world...

Jessie was apprehensive. The flamingo had finally stopped threatening her and closed its beak. Only to stick it into a keyhole and rotate it 90 degrees, opening a previously hidden chamber. No doubt it would gloat about this fabulous technology later. The heavy door creaked and swung inwards. Jessie released her breath, though she hadn’t realised she’d been holding it. For there was absolutely nothing in the room. The flamingo shrieked. It hurt Jessie’s ears, being almost as high pitched as the Mosquito Alarm. Jessie scrutinized the plaque on the enclosure’s door. Astonished, she read it again. She blinked, shook her head and read it a third time.

But the message remained the same. The *fluoro green converse was created by the monstrous flamingo!!* That would mean that Prue was in grave danger. Perhaps the ‘rescue’ wasn’t actually that at all. Maybe the flamingo had carefully planned it – Jessie would regain her confidence, only to lose it once she saw her friends imprisoned. But, judging by that high pitched shriek – it didn’t sound like it was part of the Perfectly Despicable Plan...

As if wounded, the flamingo was still wailing piteously. “My mistake masterpiece minion, yet again, has made a malevolent get away! Nooo!” it screamed. Jessie thought it was a bit thick that the flamingo was calling the converse malevolent. She was also curious as to how something could simultaneously be a mistake and a masterpiece. Clearly, all this was *not* part of the plan, or else the flamingo was an incredible actor/actress (Jessie wasn’t at all sure whether it was male or female). The elephant in the room (figuratively, as the room was empty) was whether or not the chameleons and converse were evil – could they be trusted? But Jessie soon realised that it would be no good to waste her thoughts on that, given that she would have no method of communication with Prue.

On, the converse travelled. Far and wide. They soon came upon a tower with a giant sinister eye at the top. Wait, scratch that, it sounds unsettlingly like the Eye of Sauron. Okay – so atop the tower in the land far, far away – from anything really – was a window of a chamber. Inside that chamber was a beautiful princess, who had been imprisoned until her handsome, gay, young prince comes gallantly to her rescue. No! Too Disney and normal for this perfectly weird and wacky story I’m writing. By now, you are probably irritated by my wavering moments of indecision.

Well, here comes some unfortunate news – there *may* be some more of this throughout. Until the end! But stay! Please! I have some good news! We have now reached the conclusion of this *brief* section of indecision. The converse had taken them to a building. Ooh, you’re (hopefully) thinking, wow – what’s so great about a building? Well, I’ll tell you. But first, you really need to be notified that sarcasm doesn’t suit you. So, now that’s over and done with – back to the building. Now back to me. Now back to the building. And back to me. I’m in an Old Spice ad.

Well! That was a long tangent to go off on. This is my longest *written* tangent yet. (Oh, wait – perhaps you could call this whole story a tangent...?) I guess this just goes to show that I have the attention span of a newt (It is 20 seconds; I looked it up and found this information on Wiki Answers, an extremely reliable source, given that I may have gone in and written that answer myself and I may or may not know the actual attention span of a newt. I was initially referring to the common expression anyway, so this whole bracketed piece of writing wasn’t really necessary.) Anyway, returning to the major plot line...

The perfectly inconspicuous fluorescent shoe set itself down atop the building. (I forgot to mention that the building is special because it is bright pink. So far I haven’t devised another reason for why I am focusing on it right now...)
Why had the converse brought them to such a ridiculous location? Only it would know. They entered from a conversed-sized hatch in the roof. Prue was perfectly fine, but all the chameleons automatically imploded. The converse, surprisingly, began to communicate with Prue. “I set this up so that anything with any portion of evil intent will die on entry to the haven. Clearly, you are pure of heart and soul. Wow! That was deep! But the point is I can trust you.”

“Right. Okay. Are such extreme methods necessary? And does that mean the chameleons were evil?” Prue asked, put off by the chameleon gut splattered walls.

“Yes, to both the former and the latter. My name is Justine, by the way.”

“But why are such methods necessary? And what if the chameleons had ‘magically’ mortally wounded me on the way here?”

“My goodness! You do ask a lot of questions. First off – anyone with evil intent is likely one of the flamingo’s minions. And second – it was a risk we had to take. There was no way around it. Would you have preferred if I had left you there?”

Prue shook her head vigorously. “Flamingo? Minions? What? And do you know where Jessie is?” Prue said, relieved that she was with someone who knew (even if vaguely) what was going on.

“You haven’t, by any chance, seen a giant, blood red flamingo around the place?” A blank look from Prue. “I guessed not. Right – seen anything odd lately?” Prue gestured to her falcon wings, the converse and generally everything around her. “Yes. The flamingo has been making drastic changes to the balance so it can attempt world domination. See, it plans to turn our world down side up, until we all admit that it has total control over us and beg for mercy, for the return of normality.”

“Right....” Prue said slowly, feeling completely weirded out.

“The minions – they are its previous experiments. That would be the chameleons and the like. And me. Except I was able to escape. But then I was captured again and achieved the feat a second time.”

“But – but – wouldn’t that make you – evil?”

“Will the questions ever stop?” Justine sighed. “Only evil while under the influence. Hehehehehe!!”

“Okay – are you aware of Jessie’s location?”

“Not precisely... But I do know that she has BEEN CAPTURED by the monstrous flamingo!!!”

“Okay. That’s not good.”

“Are you the queen of understatements? It’s dreadful. She might be an experiment. At any moment, she could be converted into an evil minion. She could easily change sides in this war – unless the flamingo is dissatisfied with her. In which case, she may already be dead... Wait! Unless the flamingo is preoccupied by my most recent mysterious disappearance.”

“Queen of understatements? Well you are the queen of hyperbole exaggerating! This is not yet a war and I’m sure we aren’t quite that doomed!”

“We-ell, actually, we are. It is a war and has been for a long time. As soon as the flamingo made me an intelligent life-form and enlarged me to this size I began fighting it. I am the flamingo’s Arch Nemesis, and we have been warring for at least a decade. I am a realist, not a pessimist.”

“Okay. So the long and short of this is that we need to sabotage the plan of a giant red flamingo, to save Jessie and ultimately the world?”

“Precisely! But the flamingo is blood red and Jessie won’t be at all easy to save.”

“All right. One more question...”

“I’m sure it won’t be the last – but go on, if you must...”

“Why in the converse universe is this building pink? I mean – couldn’t you have picked something a little less conspicuous? Like maybe camouflage it or something?”

“You proved me right. It wasn’t your last question. You asked three! Oh fine... often things are better hidden directly in our line of sight. This building was bright pink to begin with – so it would have been noticeably obvious to camouflage it. The flamingo would have known immediately that something secretive was happening. Why it was pink to begin with? Well, you know as much about
that as I do. I personally consider this building ridiculous, but the flamingo would never guess that I hid myself in a blindingly visible building.”

“That’s actually quite clever. I’d never have thought of it that way!”

“Prue, I’m rather concerned. Why do you sound so surprised? I am ineffably clever all the time.” Prue couldn’t help but laugh at that. “What! What does your miniscule human brain consider to be so amusing?”

Prue laughed harder. “You’re very modest... It’s just that – you sound so much like my friend, Jessie. Ineffable is one of her favourite words too – along with sesquispedalian and hippocotomonstrosesesquipedaliaphobia.”

“Funny, I’ve always been fond of those, along with pulchritudinous.”

“Pulchy – what?! Never heard of that. What does it mean?”

“Yet another question. It would be more beneficial for you if you looked it up, so I am not telling the definition of pulchritudinous!”

“Oh, fine stubborn shoe – but we don’t exactly have time for such trivial pursuits at the moment. Write it down for me.”

“What’s the magic word?”

“Abracadabra? I don’t know!” Now it was the converse’s turn to laugh. If laughing it could be called – it seemed as though it was splitting at the seams.

“I was referring to please, you cabbage!”

“Oh? Sorry, just with the upside down world and everything, I thought you meant something a little more... complicated. Anyway, how shall we stop the flamingo?”

“Ah... Now, you aren’t us green as you’re cabbage looking, are you? As soon as you were insulted, you tried to cover it up and then changed the subject.” Prue had now turned a bright shade of red. Not green at all.

“I beg your pardon,” she stuttered. “C-cabbage looking? I am unaware that my physical features bear any resemblance to a cabbage!”

“I’ve changed my mind. You are green, but with a lovely vocabulary. It’s a saying. ‘You’re not as green as you’re cabbage looking’ means ‘you’re not as stupid as you look’ and seeing as I’d just called you a cabbage, I thought it was especially appropriate.”

Prue, now fuming, blurted out, “Well it isn’t a very well used saying. I’ve never heard it before! And I am NOT stupid. I’m just not as old and obscure as you are. I mean – YOU’RE A SHOE, for goodness sake!”

“I am aware of that fact. Really? No one goes around calling each other cabbages anymore? Sorry about that. But you haven’t exactly proved your intelligence to me yet. And I’m not old, but I commend you on the fact that you recognise me as unique.”

Prue was turning a nice shade of magenta. “You are SO infuriating. It isn’t a wonder that the flamingo let you escape! It probably couldn’t cope with you blabbering on, Justine!”

“Either that, or it couldn’t cope with a being intelligent as it perceives itself to be nearby. That might be it. I’ve always wondered why it seemed so easy to escape...”

And so that was that. The two people – oh wait, human and fluorescent footwear – who could save the world were having great difficulty cooperating with each other, given that their personalities were almost binary opposites.

After Prue had cooled down a bit and the converse stopped proclaiming its awesomeness, the two of them set about cleaning the walls of chameleon guts. They spoke of their plans and hoped Jessie was okay.

Justine went over the fully established plan yet again (to Prue’s immense satisfaction). Prue herself was beginning to feel a bit like a bobble-head, what with all the nodding she was doing.
Meanwhile, Jessie had not been killed or worse expelled (from Mount Carmel School). But she was being held in the quarantine custody section of the blood red flamingo’s facility. Perhaps this was equally as awful, but this was yet to be determined. She felt rather sickened by the frangipani scent. It seemed that it was emanating from this room, her prison, given that the aroma was so strong. Jessie turned on the cot she’d been assigned, to stare towards the centre of the room. She saw the frangipani tree and made a silent bet to herself that it would prove to be somehow unusual or magical. It was funny – she’d loved frangipanis when she was younger, but now she felt as though she’d detested them forever. Perhaps this was how the flamingo recruited its experiment victims. Maybe, the scent was designed to be so off putting, so odorous, that no one could stand it. They would eventually bend to the flamingo’s will and beg to be let out – promising anything in the process (maybe even their first born child would suffer). Jessie considered the prospect. Perhaps the frangipani itself was one of the favourite ‘minions’. Maybe it weeded out bad recruits. If you couldn’t stand it, you’d beg (making you a good recruit) or die (there would be NO recruit).

She gazed into the centres, those bright yellow cores with creamy white budding out in a symmetrical pattern. It was hard to take her eyes off something so bright and yet so dark. But she knew the moral high ground was with her. The flamingo had to be stopped.

Now, one rather crucial development that I forgot to mention. Following the trajectory from the top of the frangipani tree, there were layers of dirt… and then the emerald (and more puddles of chameleon guts, just to make you squeamish!)

Prue boarded the converse. She made a joke about “the last call for passages flying on the CON123” and “thank you for flying with converse air. We hope you enjoy your flight (who enjoys a flight anyway?)” And then they were soaring through the air, not a care in the world. Wait, rewind that a minute. Not a care in the world? That’s not quite true. They had a lot of things on their minds (which included Jessie and a certain blood red someone).

Jessie needed to hang in there. She didn’t want to be a damsel in distress, waiting to be rescued. Not at all. But it seemed that there was no better alternative. The best option was to wait for Prue and whoever else she was bringing on the rescue mission. (She was certain that Prue would find a way to rescue her, ineffably awesome as she was.)

Harnessed with a shoelace, Prue glided down to the emerald. (Justine had taught her how to render the light beams useless) She enveloped it in the blanket she was holding and was hauled upwards. No green flashes; nothing noteworthy.

Upon returning to the haven, the gem, having been used for evil, imploded. The flamingo no longer had power. But its previous enchantments remained. Which, thinking about it, was quite good – Justine would have just returned to being one normal shoe (completely useless, especially without her pair). Seeing as the flamingo had constantly been pouring more power into the frangipani, it abruptly stopped working its cruel magic on Jessie.

Jessie felt that the frangipani was releasing her. *Thank goodness*! she thought. *Maybe the flamingo has decided I could be useful after all.* But the flamingo did not come to let her out. Jessie considered this to be rather peculiar. She instinctively knew she should stay, as if transfixed, starting at the plant. Minutes passed, but still nothing happened.

Rescue mission 101:
“Rope?”
“Check!”
“Weapons we don’t intend to use?”
“Check!”
“With ammunition?”
“Check!”
“Lollies?”
“What do we need lollies for? Check!”
“You’ll find out. Water supply?”
“Check!”
“Okay. We have everything we need for our mission!”
“I really don’t understand why we need lollies!” exclaimed Prue.
“Oh, you’ll see!” Justine laughed. “It’s all part of the scheme.”

Jessie, by now, was becoming quite bored. Perhaps this was all planned – maybe she’d beg for entertainment or something? She willed herself to sit there, examining every flower and reciting pi, wishing with all her heart that her saviour would arrive.

The converse zoomed down the chameleons’ tunnel (with Prue on board, of course). They came to the great tree at the heart of the cavern. Entering the tree, they came upon a trapdoor. Not particularly impressive and just generally cliché and predictable. Justine blasted through, leaving only smithereens of the wood (which had a shiny finish). The flamingo was upon them immediately. It tried to cast a spell on the intruders, though shouting “My precious minion has returned, may we all rejoice!”

The blood red creature, too late, realised something was amiss. Justine and Prue pushed past it. “What have you done? What have you done? Where is my glorious emerald?” it screamed at the top of its vocal range. The flamingo, powerless, flew at speed, attempting to peck them apart. But to no avail – Justine was far too fast for that. And because she knew her way around, she did not hesitate to head towards where she was sure Jessie would be. They crashed through the glass viewing window of the frangipani room and scooped up a rather astonished Jessie. The tree, deprived of the magic imbued into the air of the room, abruptly wilted and shrivelled to a pile of dust. But there was a lapis lazuli in its place.

Justine grabbed the gem. She used its power to reverse all the enchantments (except one – herself) which took so much energy, that after the spells were done, the gem simply disintegrated. Everything was back to normal; Prue and Jessie were immensely glad and the flamingo fuming.

“Now! What did we need the lollies for? And, for that matter, everything else we packed?” Prue demanded. She did not get a decent answer, but Jessie’s eyes filled with hopeful longing. But Justine took no notice of either of them. She headed over to the, now bawling, flamingo. The two friends watched in awe as she fed a lolly to the flamingo. Rapidly, it changed colour and shrank to a flamingo-esque size. Fury no longer filled its eyes – no, it looked confused and flew out at the walls, until it eventually found the tunnel and rose up, off into the distant sunset. Just a normal flamingo, in a normal world... Well – not quite normal – Justine was still a giant talking converse – but close enough. Greedily, Jessie was now upon the lollies, devouring them ravenously. Prue couldn’t help but laugh. “Oh, you cabbage!” she scolded. So that was that.

That night, Jessie’s parents were very surprised to see that she’d brought a fluoro green shoe to stay the night, but that was Jessie. Eclectic and exciting Jessie. They sighed and agreed.

Prue returned home and was relieved at how normal everything seemed. She was asleep before her head hit the pillow, exhausted as she was.
Jessie got up bright and early. She didn’t do that very often. She’d just had the most peculiar dream and deigned to tell the story of it to her sleepy parents before they’d had their coffee.

You can’t believe I am going to end my story like this, can you? I did say I was more creative than to end with the highly irritating ending of “I woke up and it was all a dream”, but the dream resolved nicely, so that’s okay, isn’t it? Anyway...

It was a particularly normal day, just cloudy. She put on her drab school uniform, just like nine hundred and ninety nine other students from Mount Carmel School were doing at that exact moment. As per usual, she caught the bus to school, whereupon she discovered something out of the ordinary...

The End
“Maybe there wasn’t time for goodbyes, or for apologies, or for thanks. But there had been enough time to love what she had, and there had been enough time for it to have been worth it.”
Life is always changing. Sometimes I wonder whether the way we see the world is different to the way it actually is, or our minds are just forever struggling to keep moving, to keep up, but what can keep up with something that does not hold fear, which will never falter at a door because of the unknown on the other side?

But then again, who can explain life, or change? It is one of those things that will always be up to the mind of the beholder, for anybody to interpret as they believe is right, or as they believe they can cope with.

I am startled because I find that I am not as fragile as I had once thought. I had been too scared to test the waters to notice that the water had frozen over, and I could walk over it. It was like I had healed without noticing.

The thought makes me think, and this is not something I do very often. Think on one subject for extended periods of time, that is, not thinking in general, although that can be rare on occasions, too. I try not to focus too much energy on my thoughts, as it can be exhausting, almost like having to untangle some really knotted cables, but with my feet. And the cables were actually barbed wire, and it was just safer altogether to not remember or think at all.

I sigh, but it isn’t as filled with sorrow as some are. It was just hopeful.

“She seems to be getting better,” I had my ear pressed to the door and heard my mother talking to somebody I didn’t know, or just someone I didn’t remember. He was speaking about me like I was sick. I wasn’t sick, just incapacitated. My father would say I was ‘tired for extended periods of time’.

“She isn’t having as many… delusional thoughts. At least, she isn’t voicing them to us,” The unknown voice murmured seriously.

“Well, she was always a quick learner. She must’ve caught on by now.”

“Yes, well. We have run tests, every test we have available to us. To all appearances, she is stable. She hasn’t improved, but she hasn’t declined either. We have nothing.’ He emphasised the last word, as if nothing were some disgusting disease that he would rather die than have. That was me, repulsive.

“Nothing? At all?” There it was again, the word uttered like a dirty curse, or a deadly secret. Sometimes nothing is a good thing, like when you have nothing but happiness, or nothing to worry about. Why are they acting like it is the plague?

Oh yeah. Because they want something.
I was used to this. I was always shut out. Mother thought she was protecting me, but all she did was make it so much worse. By then, though, I was so used to all of this that I barely blinked an eye. I just assumed that if the problem was serious, I would know.

Or so I thought.

Break. A word with more meanings than a jealous girlfriend.

Break, Verb. To separate into two pieces. To fracture. To malfunction. To find an opening or flaw in. To divide.


The list is infinite, to an extent, yet we always know what is meant when used in a sentence. How is that? And how is it that somebody can use the word in a sentence without misusing it?

The doll stares at me from across the room and if I could only do one more thing before I lay down and never move again, I would throw the stupid thing in a shredder and have peace. Its eyes where only buttons, but the stitched-on smile looked sinister, and its head sat at an unnatural tilt. Why did people make these things?

My thoughts jump around a lot, I realise. Sometimes I think normal things, like how it’s a hot day or that my father hasn’t visited in a while. Then there’s times that I think about abstract things, things that don’t even make sense to me.

They are fractured, with jagged edges that make them hard to approach, but a silky centre that makes it impossible not to try. But when I try to get close, to understand, I get cut or scratched, and barely get a glimpse of the thought itself. A broken sky, a twisted waterfall, a burning earth. But what relevance do these thoughts have if I could only see fragments of a picture that made no sense to me?

“Where did your doll go?”

“I… threw it in a shredder?” I raised my heavy head and tried to focus on the small detail within a million.

“What shredder? Honey, we don’t own a shredder.”

“Are you sure?”

“Sure.”

Silence.
How could you classify something as broken? A child would insist his toy was fine until it became clear that it was absolutely useless, but their mother would know it to be broken from a ripped thread, a removed head, a snapped piece of plastic.

But people are different, and can be divided into two categories. Some, like the mother, will make sure that if they are damaged they are repaired before they break. They see the potential danger and don’t deny things. Then there are those that, like a child, insist they are fine until they are gone, and no amount of stitching can put them back together.

For most people, getting out of bed is one of the hardest things in their day. I had the same problem, but for very different reasons.

My mother seemed to have some weird delusion that I had a concussion or something, but the truth was I had no idea why I was suddenly confined to my bed. I was sick, but she was kidding herself if she thought a little rest would fix me. It was a lot more complicated than that. I couldn’t spend my life in bed.

Every time my feet touched the floor, she was there, pushing my shoulders until I was lying on my back again. I also got the feeling my mother was slipping me a drug of some sort, because I was sleeping a lot more than I ought to.

The only advantage to this treatment was that I was given ample time to think, even if I didn’t necessarily want to. My thoughts were like an extremely filthy house. You didn’t want to deal with it, but at some stage you had to finally sort it all out.

“Nothing coming up on that little machine?” I smirked when I saw my doctor’s eyes widen. He had a machine hooked up to me and was writing something on a clipboard, but I could tell he wasn’t having any success. He kept looking at his watch, probably regretting being assigned to me. He probably thought being a doctor meant that he could fix someone, and never see them again. He could be somebody’s hero, save a couple lives and then go home for dinner. Ha.

He seemed to think about lying to me, but he sighed and said, “No, not just yet. I think your mother just wants to be doing something.” That was something I could understand. I understood my mother, and I knew that she didn’t cope well when faced with a challenge that money couldn’t solve. The doctor continued, “She just asked me to run every test available, but—”

The man looked up. “She asked me not to tell you anything, you know.”

“I had a hunch,” I opened my mouth and let him take my temperature, being a lot more patient than I had been the day before. “What’s your name?” I asked. The thermometer muffled my words, but he understood.

“Daniel Bass.”

“Like the fish?” I asked. This drew a small smile.
“Yeah. Like the fish.”

Silence is a funny thing. It can fill a room, yet it is simply a state of nothing. Nothing being said or heard, yet you hear silence just as you would a voice. There are different types of silences, too. Comfortable silences. Uncomfortable silences. A silence of sadness, or a silence of peace. A silence of loathing or a silence of love.

Nowadays silence is a rare thing, but rare things are often the most intriguing.

“You know, I’m fine. You really don’t have to do all these tests. Just tell my mother that I’m fine.”

“You tell me this every time I’m here, and I’ll always have the same answer.”

“I know. It just seems so pointless. We all know what’s wrong with me.”

“She just cares about you. Read these out aloud,” he said, pointing at a sign that listed a bunch of random letters in bold black font.

“Why are we testing my eyesight?”

“Well, sometimes if your eyesight is getting worse it can indicate some problems in the brain.”

I stared at the letters, starting big and gradually getting smaller and smaller until they were too small to read. I thought about how that’s what some people go through every day, getting smaller and smaller until nobody can see them anymore, until they almost don’t matter anymore.

“E, O, U, P…”

Most people don’t have many memories of their early childhood, if any. Unfortunately, the few that stuck in my mind all involved my mother screaming and crying, over the smallest things that wouldn’t matter to a normal mother. She would try and hide it, but she resented me. She had always wanted a classic family, white picket fence and all, and I wasn’t that.

I was drawing on a white sheet of paper, painting the dull blank space with vibrant colours. My mother stood behind me, watching with growing curiosity.

“What are you drawing, sweetie?”

“Wait until it’s finished!”

And she waited.

“So will you tell me what it is now?” Mother asked.
“Mum, can’t you see? That, yeah there, that’s the sun. And that’s Mercury and Venus, and then mars and –”

“Where’s Earth?”

“Earth is gone, it left ages ago. It went back home. Anyway, that’s you and that’s me –”

“My mother interrupted.

“I don’t know, it just did.”

“Why did you draw this? Eva, I thought you liked Barbie. Why don’t you draw her?”

“Because I know what Barbie looks like,” I said confidently.

My mum pursed her lips and stared at the picture for a long time. She traced the edges of the sun with her index finger, but didn’t look at me.

“Go to your room,” she said, staring blankly into the wall. I hesitated, because it caught me off guard. I had never been sent to my room for throwing tantrums, let alone drawing a picture. “Now!”

Being a little kid, I ran. I spent the rest of the day in my room, listening to her make phone calls to people I didn’t know. I remember being confused, and crying simply because my mother was. I didn’t know then that she was angry with me, but I figured it out soon enough.

Dr Bass came to my room every day, bringing a new test each day. Sometimes he brought me puzzles and books, too, because I had to do a lot of waiting around before he got some of the results. And also because he knew I liked Sudoku, and I could finish a game of it before he could finish half of his.

“You’re smart for your age, you know.”

“I know.”

“And arrogant, too,” I just smiled, and continued making my bed. The flowers in the vase on my bedside table were wilting, but I didn’t change them. They were from my mother.

“You know, she only comes into this room to feed me. She doesn’t ask me how I am, or try and talk to me about this. Just food.”

Another silence filled the room like noxious gas, suffocating me. It pressed on my lungs, and I could feel it ringing in my ears.

“What about your father? Can you tell me about him?” I turned to see Dr Bass looking at me strangely, like I was fragile and if he said the wrong thing I would break. There it is again, ‘break’.

I hesitated, but not long enough for the silence to gather again.

“Yeah. Yeah, I can.”
He lived with us when I was younger. I wasn’t so young that I can’t remember, but it was long enough ago that the memories I have are patchy. They’re fuzzy around the edges, riddled with holes. This story may not be entirely accurate, but the one detail I remember completely is the only important one.

My father was a good man. I got my looks from him, did you know? My hair was dark like his, before. And our eyes are the same. Were the same. And he was smart, too. He could answer any question, even when my mum asked them. She asks hard questions, like, “Eva, why do you hide your bracelet?” or, “When will you ever grow up?” I could never answer them, but my father could. He would say, “Her bracelet reminds her of shackles.” And “When she’s ready, Hannah. She’ll grow up when she’s ready.”

I looked up to him a lot, you know. He always seemed so pure, so perfect. I could always count on him. He would always be on my side, even if I was wrong. I think it was his consistency that I loved best about him. I had always heard about those parents who cancelled all their plans, and made excuses, but I had been blessed to never experience it first-hand.

I was seven years old. My mum had driven me home from school and I walked up the front steps, already shouting to my father about my day. My mum was in the kitchen, starting on dinner.

“...and then Jenna gave me this really cool rubber, it looks like a duck!” I called from my room.

Silence. I was no stranger to silence, having my mother being the way she was, but this silence was different. It was heavy. It made you feel cold and alone.

That’s when I walked into his bedroom and found him there, hanging from the ceiling, a rope looped around his neck and a chair lying on its side directly under his dangling feet.

When you meet somebody, you instantly think you know them. You take their first impression and twist it, mould it, morph it until you have a whole story about that one person. You think you know exactly how their mind works. How they feel.

We do it because a person is complex. It takes more than a mind to figure a human being out. It’s all a whole lot easier for us to convince ourselves we know it all, and that there is nothing this person can throw at you that you won’t expect.

Then we find someone who throws something you don’t expect, and keeps on throwing everything in the room until you begin to expect the unexpected. They keep you on your toes, intoxicate you, and draw you in. Kind of like the way a fly is drawn into a Venus fly trap, blissfully ignorant to its impending doom.

The breeze brushed by my face and whipped my hair into knots, but I was far from caring. I was outside. I could smell freedom. I could taste my old life, a normal life.
Leaving the house for the first time in three months wasn’t an awakening, it was my return. I felt like the world had waited, and I had come. What seemed like a bittersweet reunion felt more like a gift that kept on giving.

My mother walked behind me, a few metres away. I appreciated the space, and I knew she did, too. She had always been introverted, withdrawn from everything, even her own daughter. Even more so since I had gotten ill, and I knew she was sad, and afraid. I understood her, but that didn’t make it any easier. I felt like I had to do everything on my own.

I had the suspicion that my doctor had convinced her to let me out, but I still didn’t understand what he could’ve said to change her mind. I also got the feeling that I only knew a fraction of what they had discussed, and that made me uneasy. Mother had always kept things from me, but this was different. This was my life she was keeping from me, and I deserved to know where I stood.

I almost turned around and confronted her. Almost.

Instead I focused on the soft rush of the waves and the feel of the grainy sand beneath my feet. I had didn’t want to enjoy this too much, in case I never saw it again, but I also wanted to drink everything in for the same reason. I inhaled deeply and tried to fix the smell in my mind. I wanted to bottle this feeling and keep it in a jar, just in case I needed it later.

I watched a couple of kids slapping mud together, building a trench around their make-believe castle. They laughed and giggled, but all it reminded me of was sadness. I couldn’t help but think of how their smiles would fade when they were told to leave, or when someone stood on the mound and it collapsed into the sand. Just like when I was given freedom all I could think about is when I would be forced to return to captivity.

“Do a spin, Eva!” My father laughed as I twirled around the room clumsily in my fluffy princess dress. I giggled hysterically while he took photo after photo, lighting up the room with each flash. Ripped wrapping paper littered the floor and a small pile of opened presents sat in the corner, safely out of the way.

“David,” I heard her shoes clicking on the hardwood floors and she had a grim expression etched into her face as she started at my father. ‘We need to... talk.” My smile slipped off my face. I sat on the floor and sifted through my presents, picking up ugly Barbies and plastic bracelets. I scowled at the pink slippers and threw them across the room. I could hear yelling from the kitchen, but at that point in my life, I had learned to block it out. I didn’t understand, but that was the worst part.

“You can’t take her to Disney Land, David! We don’t have that kind of money to just throw around! You know how many treatments she needs just this month?”

“It’s her birthday.”

“What about the house, huh? The bills? The mortgage? David... I can’t keep doing this. We can’t keep doing this. I’m exhausted.”

“This is life, Hannah! It’s hard!”
Even back then, I hated silence. I feared it, especially silences like these. Silences between my mother and father, where they stared at each other and tried to remember how they got into their mess of a life.

“What’s the matter, Eva?”

I stared out the window of our car, not looking my mother in the eyes. It used to be hard every now and then, I would get angry at her and need some space. Now it was getting to be hard all the time, and it had gotten to the point where I couldn’t talk to her without feeling disgusted. Abandoned. Forgotten.

“Eva?”

I let silence talk for me. She obviously got the message; that I didn’t want to talk to her, because she started to watch the houses and buildings flash past her window as well. The only difference between us was that while her eyes focused on signs, buildings, taking them in, mine slid blankly over them all as I tried to block out the world.

Have you ever tried to keep your mind blank? Most times it is infuriatingly difficult. You think you’ve done it, but then you have a little voice in the back of your mind, or a little song that’s been playing in your brain for a few days. But right now, my mind wouldn’t not be blank. It’s like when I was little and I put two disks in my DVD player at once, and the player broke. I had too much pain to process that my mind had taken its only escape and wiped itself blank.

We were back to my house, but it wasn’t my home. It was more like my prison. You’d think that if there was nothing to be done, no cure for my disease, then I would be allowed to live as I desired and not have my last few months confined to my own home.

I trudged up the path, purposefully stalling, but not just to put off going back inside. My mother hated taking her time, it was always a rush. This way I got under her skin. I hoped she’d yell at me, but I knew better. She was the peace keeper, or so she thought.

Just as I thought, we entered without a word and I roughly brushed the back of my hand against my eyes before running to my bedroom. Another silence, and I was beginning to think that the good silences were just a myth.

Snow drifted past my window in little flakes. They were so white they almost hurt to look at, and I remember being little, and how back then if it had snowed I would be the happiest girl alive. Now it just made me sad, and reminded me of what I was being forced to give up.

“So, you ready to go have some fun?” I looked up through my wet eyelashes at Dr Bass, who was smiling so much that he almost looked like the Grinch. Except I’m sure he didn’t mean to ruin Christmas.
“I can’t. I’m away for a crime I didn’t commit,” I joked, but my voice cracked and gave me away. Surprisingly, though, Dr Bass simply smiled even more.

“Well, the warden is letting you out today. Doctor’s orders, of course.”

I had my parka on in seconds and before he knew what hit him, we were out in the snow, and for once, even though my breath scratched at my throat and my chest felt tight, I felt lucky.

“Hey, Daniel?”

“Yes?” My doctor injected something into my arm, but I had grown used to the feeling. I had known needles before I had known breast milk. I had known medication before I had known my father.

“Am I annoying?” I asked the question nervously, slightly afraid he would say yes. That’s what my mother would’ve said, but she wouldn’t be joking. She’d laugh, but it would be hollow, and completely transparent. I should’ve known by then that Daniel was nothing like my mother, but I didn’t want to get my hopes up, so he kept surprising me over and over.

“God, no. You’re one of my best patients, did you know?” He laughed, and it felt like my heart warmed from the inside. “You’re so brave, I’ve never known a girl your age to go along with this kind of treatment so easily. I’m proud of you, Eva.”

I’m proud of you, he said. I almost started crying right then and there, but I held myself together. I was brave, he said. I had to keep my reputation. But the truth was, nobody had ever said something like that to me since my father.

And as I was trying to hold back tears, I felt a pain that was much worse than my regular headaches. It pierced me between the eyes, and I could imagine it driving straight through my brain before I blacked out.

Hands without bodies ripped at my face, my clothes, my body. One of them had a hammer and was banging it on my skull, but for the strangest reason it felt like it was hitting me from inside.

I opened my eyes but everything was black. Swirling shapes beckoned, but it was as if they were behind a veil. I could see them, gesturing for me to join them, but I couldn’t make out their features. I could hear them, whispering my name, but I could not hear anything else they said. Curiosity was killing me.

Just as I was about to pull back the veil, I felt the hands grab my shoulders and hold me there. I felt the one with the hammer, pounding me all over, and I could feel new people, ones with sharp fingernails piercing my arms, my chest and my neck. All of a sudden, I knew that the people beyond the veil were not on my side. They wanted my soul.

I stopped struggling, and turned around.

I saw a simple white candle sitting on an ornate white coffee table. It danced and flickered, like it was blowing a gale, but I felt no wind. It seemed that it was burning like a regular candle, but the
wax was melting a lot slower, and as I approached it I began to make out small pencil marks along
the wax.

1 day left. 2 days left. 3 days left.
I stopped reading them. I did not want to read how many days were written at the top.

I awoke to Christmas in a hospital room.
I opened my eyes slowly and found that I was connected to so many machines, you’d think I was
dying.
Well, I guess I was.
I guess I am.
I was alone – no surprises there – but in the corner of the room a miniature Christmas tree sat with a
few presents stashed underneath. It must be Christmas, or close to, meaning I was passed out for at
least a couple of days. My mother’s jacket was slung over the back of a chair, so I guess that meant
she had been here.
Then the door opened, and a doctor walked in, followed by Mother. The doctor smiled reassuringly,
though it didn’t make me feel any better, and started fiddling with all of the machines.
“Where’s Daniel?”
“Eva!”
“Dr Bass, I mean. Where is he?”
The doctor laughed, though I felt like it wasn’t his place to laugh. This wasn’t funny, it was serious.
“People switch doctors all the time. Different conditions, different doctors. I can tell him you asked,
though.” The doctor never looked at me once.
“Can’t you switch with him?”
“Afraid not, honey. We’re all assigned jobs and this was mine.” The new doctor looked at me
sympathetically, which made me uncomfortable.
“I’m sure we’ll get along just great, Eva. You just wait.”

Daniel Bass shot through the hospital, once almost barrelling right into an old lady to get to the west
wing. He searched room after room until he found who he was looking for.
“Daniel! What are you doing here?”
“Doctor Goodman, I need to ask a favour.”
The doctor sighed, and excused himself from his patient. “I should’ve known this was coming. She asked for you, you know?”

“She’s my patient, Will, and she needs me.”

“She doesn’t need you, Daniel. She needs a doctor, she needs sleep, and she needs happiness.”

“She’s just a child! Her own mother doesn’t comfort her, and she needs a doctor she trusts.”

“And you think she trusts you?”

“She has for six months now.”

Dr Will Goodman looked sympathetically at Daniel, but it made him uncomfortable. Dr Goodman had a way of making people feel that way, and Daniel knew it. He couldn’t stand the thought of not helping her, of not trying to make things better for her. She had a tough life. Even so, in the back of his mind he felt guilty, because he knew that this wasn’t just about her. It was about him, too.

“Please, doctor. Help her.”

Dr Goodman sighed again, and cleaned his glasses.

“Daniel!” I cried with delight. The past couple of days had been murder. My mother had sat in the chair by the window for hours a day, staring out like she’d rather be anywhere but here. I tried to start up a conversation, but this time she was the one ignoring me.

He smiled and sat on the end of my bed, careful not to sit on my legs.

“That other guy was a complete slapper, he-“

“Eva!” My mother cried from her window seat. She never uttered a word unless I was dishonouring the family name.

“I’m just being honest.”

Daniel smiled, but it was a sad smile. “I’m not going to be your doctor here.”

‘Wait... you’re not?”

“If you go back home I will be, and I’ll visit you here, I promise,”

“I’m fine. It’s fine, you know, I’ll be... fine.”

“I know you will be. But I need to come back, to try and beat you at Sudoku.”

I laughed. It was a shaky, raspy laugh. It was sad, and it was happy, but also hopeful.

Being impatient was one of my worst traits. I couldn’t wait for anything. When I was little, I remember cooking cupcakes with my mother, but she wouldn’t let me eat any of the mixture until they were cooked. I couldn’t wait, so I went into the oven while she wasn’t and dipped my finger
into the mixture. The mixture was hot, and I burned myself, but yet as life went on I never learned my lesson.

We did Secret Santa when I was in preschool, and I told everyone who I had. I asked everyone who they had. In the end, we all knew who we were getting presents from and ruined the whole activity. It ended up that we never gave any presents, or received any.

When I was eleven, just one year ago, I had a fish. I was never allowed pets, because I was allergic to fur. I was told that if I had a reaction, my body would be too weak and I would break, but my mum got me a fish to make up for it. I wanted to feed it, and I was too impatient. I feed it every five minutes, and it ate so much it died.

And now I had to wait for the verdict, for the news that would seal my fate. I had grown a lot in just one year, but I was still the same person, and I was still impatient. I sat and waited, and waited, and waited.

Then the news came, and I realized I shouldn’t have been waiting. You should never wait for somebody to come and ruin your good day, your good week, or your good year. You should never wait for someone to come and ruin your life.

When I was born, I was very fragile. My mother held me and she thought I would crumble in her hands. She thought that it was normal, that every child born was frail for the beginning, but she was wrong.

I had been given a death sentence. A limit to my life. Other kids have nothing to worry about, they just go to school and come home every day. I’d been branded, and my time was finally running out.

My mother cried. I cried. My mother cried some more.

I didn’t have some life altering epiphany. My life didn’t flash before my eyes. I just felt hollow, but maybe that was for the best. I knew this was coming. I knew my body better than any machine. And I was happy that for a little while, I almost felt like I had a family.

I was allowed to go home. I guess there was nothing that the doctors could do, and I may as well have a bit of fun while I still could. But they didn’t know that my home was just as bad as being stuck in that small room, suffocating in grief. You could smell death in the west wing.

But my room smelt like broken spirit, and I felt defeated.

I took a deep breath and rounded the corner, making myself visible to my mother. Her back was turned, so I had some time to compose myself before I put on my brave face and dove headfirst into a potential bloodbath.
“Hey mum...?” I asked tentatively.

“Yes dear?” She said. Her face had gathered more lines and her hair was streaked with grey. Her eyes were always dull now, and her lips always pursed. I guess this was hard on her as well as me.

“Can I go ice skating with Daniel?” I asked quickly. I figured she might be so shocked by the rapid fire question that she’d say yes. I guessed wrong.

“No. You’re sick, you know you can’t.”

“Mum! You know it won’t make any difference! It’s not like I have the flu, it doesn’t get better with rest. You heard them, I know you did. ‘No cure’.”

“I am your mother! I have to protect you, and sick children can’t go ice skating with strange men!”

“He’s not strange! He’s been my doctor for about eight months, you know? Or were you ignoring him too?”

“Eva—”

“No, listen Mum. I have listened to you for too long. I am going, and you can’t stop me from going.”

I took a deep breath. It hurt me to say these things, but it was necessary.

“You have never cared about me. If you did, you would have wanted me to be happy.”

And I walked right past her to the door, slamming it closed behind me. Purposely leaving my prison behind, unknowingly leaving my sanctuary. I pretended not to hear her sobs as I left.

“You’re late!” Daniel called, but his smile gave him away. He held a pair of skates in his hand, a much bigger pair laced onto his feet. I was glad we only live ten minutes from here, or I would be exhausted.

I put on my own skates and rocketed onto the ice, only wobbling a bit. My father had taken me ice skating a couple of times, but I was a bit rusty. All I knew was that I definitely did not want to fall. The ice looked about a million miles away, and I was feeling a bit disoriented.

I hated to spoil this perfect, perfect moment. I watched other families skate around and was warmed by the fact that we probably looked like that. Father and daughter, out for a day on the ice. A Christmas tradition, possibly.

And we skated, and we laughed, and he taught me to spin in circles without falling on my face, which I had to do several times before I got the hang of it. Each time I fell he helped me up, and I didn’t feel so bad after a while.

My mother sat at home, waiting for me. She pretended to read her novel but her eyes weren’t moving, and she wasn’t wearing her reading glasses. Her eyes were red, but I tried not to focus on anything like that. It just made me sad.
I walked quietly into the living room, until it became apparent that she wasn’t going to yell at me. She wasn’t going to cry, or even talk to me. She was giving me the opportunity to go upstairs while she ignored me and pretended not to see me. In the morning it would be as if I never left, and we would eat breakfast and talk like we were a normal family, and I was a perfect daughter.

I wouldn’t give her that chance.

“Mum?”

She didn’t look up.

“Mum!”

“Oh honey, I didn’t see you there. Hurry to bed, sweetie.” Her voice was raw, as if she’d been screaming. It hurt to listen to. I walked up the stairs and went to sleep wondering if, when I was gone, she would pretend she never had a daughter, just like she pretended she didn’t lose her husband.

Hannah didn’t sleep. She tossed and turned all night, a knot in her gut, a hole in her heart. How did things get like this, she thought. Why?

“This is life, Hannah,” said a voice in the back of her mind. “It’s hard.”

Tears slid silently down her face. She felt cracked, like the world had kept hitting her like a piñata until she broke. If this is life, she thought, I don’t want to live anymore. It’s supposed to be hard, but this is impossible.

How could she sit by and watch her daughter die? How could she let her daughter bond with this man when she had a father already? How could she let her daughter leave the house, when they could possibly have just minutes left together?

She curled in a ball and tried to hold her emotions inside but she couldn’t stop the violent sobs from racking her body, drawing energy from her pain and grief.

I dreamt of the candle.

It was now burning lower than ever, slowly melting to a stub before my eyes. I was afraid to read the small markings. The flame lit up the area, cutting through the dark like a knife, even though it was so small and frail. It burned bright.

I heard the voices calling me through the veil, and I was drawn to them. I managed to tear my eyes from the candle and I was shocked to realise the figures beyond the veil were much, much clearer. They smiled toothless grins and beckoned me with gnarled bones. I was frightened, but also strangely calm. I had known this was coming, and it was now coming faster than ever.
I woke at the crack of dawn, and I had to leave. I couldn’t stand looking at my mother, and I was afraid that when she awoke she would be less stable than ever. It was guilt that drove me from my own home that morning.

I slid my window open slowly. It creaked a little, but I wasn’t worried. My mother was a heavy sleeper. Luckily my bedroom was on the ground floor, otherwise I would have had to risk the rickety staircase. That thing makes noises when there is nobody using it.

It was a cold night, which really helped. It’s almost as if the cold weather cleared my head. Or maybe it just held good memories, instead of clouding my head with the bad. Either way, it had always helped me get perspective on my situation before.

I didn’t know where I was going until I turned up there. I was standing on the edge of a little playground, the kind you go to when you’re about three and never return to. I wasn’t like most people, though, and the first time I had ever seen this place was when I was five.

Of course I had been the odd one out. I was the oldest there and still had the least hair, but I was five years old and I couldn’t care less. I don’t know why I came here, but there was a little cubby house and a swing, and I realized then that I really just wanted to be a kid again.

And so I slid down slides, swung on swings and did the see-saw alone until the sun rose.

Hannah awoke at dawn with dry eyes. She had fallen asleep sometime during the night and she was stiff, but she didn’t move for a long time after she woke.

She tried to remember what she had been so sad about, and when she remembered a fresh wave of guilt flooded over her again and again until she decided to make things right. An apology.

Down the hallway. Past the bathroom, the kitchen, the living room. She slowly opened the door to Eva’s bedroom to find an empty bed.

Almost immediately, the phone rang. Hannah ran to pick it up, answering with a breathless, “Hello?”

“Hannah? It’s Daniel.”

“Oh thank god, Daniel. She’s with you isn’t she?”

“Wait… what? Who, Eva?”

“Yes, who else?” Hannah’s dirty blonde hair fell in her eyes, but she didn’t brush it aside.

“Hannah, she’s not with me.”

The wrong place. The wrong time. It’s easy to blame tragedies on time, and places. We say, ‘If only she weren’t so far away,’ or ‘If only he were here yesterday!’ But it isn’t time’s fault. It isn’t anybody’s fault, but we always look for someone or something to blame.
Maybe if she weren’t alone. Maybe if she had picked a more predictable place to hide. Maybe if she left in the afternoon, and someone was there to call for help. But there is always a wrong place and a wrong time, and she just happened to choose both.

It was nobody’s fault that she was gone before she was even found.

It’s hard to explain some things. The way it feels to be home after years abroad. The strange beauty of your own newborn child. The first sign that spring is on its way.

That’s what Hannah felt when she saw her daughters face, eyes closed and expressionless, and when she felt her hands. They were not yet cold, but she felt as if Eva could not be further away from her. Eva’s face, smooth and clear of worry and sadness, almost at peace with death, ripped her fragile heart to shreds. She screamed. She cursed. She cried.

She tried to say goodbye. She tried to tell her how much she loved her, and how very, very sorry she was, but her voice caught in her throat. ‘She’s in a better place now,’ they would say. If Hannah could speak, she would scream, “What better place in the world is there but with her mother?”

It seemed a cruel twist of fate to leave her with nothing. She had given up everything, yet here she was. Alone, her husband lost to the cruel workings of his own mind, and her perfect, innocent daughter, lost to evil. Others may say different, but what could take the life of Eva without being evil? What could take life after life, feeling no guilt, feeling no pain, but evil?

What if she hadn’t fought with her? What if she were a better parent? If she weren’t so afraid of letting go, she wouldn’t have to let go forever.

Daniel was not immediate family, so he was not let in until late. He didn’t mind much. He was not himself, and time felt like it had sped up while he himself had slowed down. His thoughts were going round and round in circles, never getting anywhere, like they had been given two paddles but were so stupid as to paddle them both on the same side of the canoe.

He thought about how Eva smiled a lot when he was there. It looked like it hurt, like she had forgotten how. He thought about how she had cared so much for her mother, she couldn’t blame her for anything. It would just hurt her too much.

He thought about how much she had changed in just the short time he had known her. How she had grown so much, and he was proud. He found peace in the fact that maybe her life had meant something to her, and that was all that mattered at that moment. He could wish for her back, and he could wallow in pain for her being gone, but he knew that it would not actually bring her back.

Maybe there wasn’t time for goodbyes, or for apologies, or for thanks. But there had been enough time to love what she had, and there had been enough time for it to have been worth it.