

All I have ever wanted to do is draw. I love to draw more than almost anything else. When I pass the plants in the hallways, I draw them on whatever paper I find and color them all different shades of green, grey, red, and yellow. In my bedroom, I have dozens of my favorite pictures of trees spread out across my wall like they were painted there. I call it my "forest." I learned the term in school, it means a large tract of land covered with trees. This wall is my favorite thing in the Mall. No matter what happened that day, I can go to my room, sit on my bed with the forest that I've created staring at me, guiding me, calling to me. I wish I could see a real forest. No one knows if trees are still there on the outside, or if it is all just a barren wasteland. I asked my teacher once in school, but she said that it was a silly question, because we could never go outside the Mall. But I still feel the trees calling to me.

My name is Eden and I am a 16-year-old girl, living inside the Mall.

I found this blank journal in the antique shop, so I figured I would write down everything that happens to me. Before I talk about myself, I think I should probably tell whoever is reading this the history of the Mall. In the year 2025 of the Last Era, a horrible world war led to the death of billions, causing mankind to almost go extinct. The devastating pollution that had been eating away at the world for years became even worse, and the remaining citizens decided to live in one contained area until the earth could renew itself. My ancestors, along with many others, moved into what had once been the biggest mall in America, and farmers learned to grow crops inside with the help of our scientists. Chefs continued to cook, teachers continued to teach, and so on. It has been about 125 years since then, and I have never been the outside the Mall, and I don't think anyone else has either.

The Committee, which is in charge of everything, runs the schools as well as the Mall. Schools are very different here than they were in the Last Era. When you are seven years old, you take a reading test, a memory test, and a preliminary writing test. Those who fail are taken for labor work. If you test as "advanced," you are taken by the Committee and put into The Academy, where you receive an aptitude test each year to figure out where you will best fit into society. At twelve you will take a final aptitude test and begin to train in a specific field of study, like

science or medicine. Only those who are placed in the Academy can actually change their futures. The rest of us are stuck doing whatever our parents do until we are paired, then the Committee chooses which family's job will be assigned to the pair and their child (until they are paired and repeat the process). This has worked very well for the Mall since pairing happens at the age of twelve. The paired children do not marry yet, of course, but they spend two hours each day together, alone, getting to know each other. The rest of the time they continue their schooling and working with their parents. The Committee has found this to be a most effective way of inducing camaraderie and partnership between the two individuals. I was very lucky to be matched to the son of a Committee member, which is rare for someone who didn't make it into the Academy, but it may be because my parents are chefs and anything to do with food is highly valued in the Mall. I am going to continue to work with my parents until we get married.

My family, being the descendants of a famous Scottish chef, is allowed to run a restaurant. This is a fun job, and when I am not at school I love helping to cook the meals our citizens eat. I like to draw the food sometimes, because the colors are amazing: greens, oranges, reds, browns, even purple! But my favorite part about the restaurant is the zips. Technically they are called the "Food Transportation and Delivery Tubing System" and families call them tubes, but no one in the business uses either of those names; we call them "the zips," because when the food shoots off it makes a zipping noise. They are actually pretty big, large enough for a small person to get in there to fix whatever goes wrong or break down.

Each day the Committee gives us a list of portions we are to make and zip out to each household. Families are never allowed to ask us for extra food; the Committee's decisions are final. Of course, some citizens may receive less than others on any given day to punish those who act out or cause any trouble. Holding back food is the most reasonable punishment since food is precious here. Anyway, we put the prepared meal onto a tray, place it into the zip leading to the family's residence, press the green button in the middle of the little black panel, and voila! The food is shot off using an air suction system, which was developed about 56 years ago using the old air vents that were in the Mall when our ancestors moved in. The zips made deliveries much easier. When the family is done eating, they take their tray to the sanitation department, which is an extremely large room filled with people washing, drying, and stacking utensils and plates.

I cannot work in the restaurant all the time yet because of school. Every child goes to school from five to sixteen years old (except those who are taken for labor work) and, during those years, we learn history, English, science, home economics, and basic math. In the Last Era, they also taught art. I wish with all of my strength that the Mall had art classes. It would be wonderful to learn how to draw different things, but there are not because the Committee says art is unproductive.

I see beauty everywhere: in the plants that divide the hallways, in the faces of people I know. I have always had the urge to draw what I see. Once, when I was little, I thought it would be funny to draw on my own face, but I never got to see what I looked like since there are no mirrors anywhere in the Mall, except in the Committee members dwellings. This is to decrease vanity and have the community focus on what is on the inside of every person. After all, how can you judge someone on his or her appearance when you yourself have no idea what you look like?

My parents always tell me art is a waste of time, just like the Committee does. Of course they are right, but that doesn't stop me. In school we learned the word "passion." I think that is what I feel about my drawings. Once, when I was looking through the schoolhouse for a textbook I needed, I came across an old book about art. In this book, I learned about a man who created things with his hands: music, paintings, sculptures, and much more. He sold them to people who thought they were beautiful, and that is how he lived his life. This is what I want most in the entire Mall: I want to be an artist for my job. Art is something that is not productive as it is not useful at all in the Mall. Therefore no one has that job. But I want to change that.

The Committee always likes to hear new ideas, especially those about new jobs that could add to the productivity and harmony of the community. So, I scheduled a meeting with the Committee for the day I turn 16, and labeled the reason "new job proposal."

I went to the Committee chamber today. I pulled open the door to a small reception area with a desk on the right side, a couch, and a couple chairs against the wall on the left; this room was created for function, not beauty, but it was comfortable. I saw a woman, wearing all blue, with a

quirky smile and a cheerful twinkle in her eye. "How are you?" she said. "They will be with you any minute. But feel free to sit down!" I walked over to the couch and sat down. I looked around, but I was the only one waiting.

"Okay, hon, they're ready for you. Good luck!" The woman gave me a warm smile as she watched me open the inner door, which opened to a huge room with an oval table about the size of the Mall swimming pool, made out of marble; something obviously here from the old days. There were about twenty chairs around the table, most filled with Committee members. I sat in the chair nearest me, at the tip of the oval. "So! We hear you have a proposal for us. What is it? A new invention, perhaps? A new design to increase the productivity of farming? Tell us," said the father of my pair, Brady. I was awed just being in the same room as the Committee, and it took me a while before I could muster up the courage to answer.

"I have a request. My dream is to draw beautiful things! The old tree in the middle of the mall? I dream of it! But not just one tree, hundreds and hundreds stretching across the Mall! I have loved drawing the beauty in our community since I was little. My parents say my drawings are wonderful but unproductive. I do not believe they are unproductive. I have read in old books that art once brought beauty and happiness to citizens, and this made everyday life better. Do you see? My request is, can I be an artist for my job instead of a restaurant owner like my parents? It is my passion! What do you think? May I?" I was so out of breath when I finished that I had to take deep gulps. I watched the Committee members whisper to each other. A few glanced over to me, confused and worried faces saying things I could not hear. Finally a man held up his hand, and everyone fell silent.

"We have never heard a suggestion such as yours, Eden. I am afraid I am very disappointed in you. As a child, you had such potential! We even paired you with the son of a Committee member!" Brady's father nodded, looking at me with disapproving eyes. The man continued, "We understand you like to draw; however we had hoped you would eventually outgrow this inefficient and fruitless hobby! We would never allow anyone to do something that so wastes this community's resources. We must drive this desire out of your system! This is something we can fix if we work together. Don't worry. We will inform your parents you may not draw

anymore. If you do, you will be punished.” He was about to say something else, but the woman sitting next to him leaned over and whispered something in his ear. He nodded and returned his gaze to me. “My fellow Committee member has pointed out that unproductive behavior cannot be tolerated, so unfortunately we must punish you. For the next five days you will receive only a midday meal, and you are now of course no longer paired with Brady. We hope that this will help stomp out this ‘passion’ of yours. That will be all. Thank you.”

As I left the Committee room, I could not help but weep. Brady was my best friend, and drawing was the only thing that truly made me feel like an individual, instead of just a part in the community. By the time I got home my eyes had dried up like the deserts I had read about. My mother must have already been notified that I could no longer draw, because my art supplies were out on the table, in a box. She said she was sorry as she placed the box on top of the fridge, not out of reach. I had never been a disobedient child, never acted out; she had no reason to believe that I would go against a rule that had been set for me. By the Committee no less.

And I tried. But I simply could not function without drawing. I love it too much, even I had never realized how much until my supplies were taken away. Everything made me crave my pencils to draw my world. Something as simple as a pink ribbon flapping behind a child as she ran, or the shimmer of a green bike as it went by. Everyday, for the next five days, while my parents ate the meals I was denied, I lay on my bed and stared at my forest. I marveled at the different shades of greens that shimmered off the paper, seemingly coming to life and allowing me to walk through the forest myself. It made me realize what I have to do.

Find a way out of the Mall. I might not survive, but I cannot live here any more. I will not stop; will do anything to follow my dream. Even though I will miss Brady and my parents, I cannot live without my art.

I know escaping will be not be easy. No one has ever tried it, at least as far as I know, so I have no one to ask for help. I thought for a long time about how I could actually get to the outside. Then this morning, when I placed the Gibbons family's food portions into their proper zip, and as I saw it sucked away, I realized how I could get out. The zips! There are tubes throughout the

Mall, not just the zips, but also air tubes. I ran to my room, opened the vent, poked my head in, and felt the cool air rush in. Yes, the air tubes will be perfect. They are as wide if not wider than the food transportation tubes, because the air-purifying machine breaks down sometimes and it has to be fixed immediately. That will be my exit. For the next week, I will gather bread rolls, water bottles, cans of corn, anything I can take from the restaurant without anyone noticing, and put everything I collect under my bed so no one sees them.

It has been difficult since food is rationed so strictly, but after working double time for a while, I now have enough. I also read as many books as I could about the skills I will need on the outside. I read about building a fire, and what to eat and what was poisonous. This morning, I volunteered to help out at the farms, and I stole seeds to grow food. But, most importantly, I have been hiding paper. As much clean, unused, beautiful paper as I could find, and my pencils, and four pencil sharpeners that I took from my supplies on the top of the fridge. I finally think I have enough now. I packed the suitcase my parents had bought me for overnights at a friend's house. I am ready to go.

I made it. I got out! I need to write down how I got out for whoever is going to read this. When I was ready to go, I could not stop thinking about the Mall. Was there anyone else like me? What about Brady? Was he at all like me? I did not know. Did he or others want to create beautiful things? I wasn't sure, but I know that if there was any chance the answer was yes, I had to reach out, and tell them what I was doing. So I went to the television broadcasting room. There was no guard as there is no crime in the Mall. The video camera I took is wirelessly connected to the main broadcasting frequency, picked up by every household in the Mall. No one uses the televisions for recreation; they broadcast announcements from the Committee. But now it was my turn to make an announcement. I was going to show the Mall that others could leave and be whoever they want to be, do whatever they want to do, and not be told their future by the Committee.

I began my ascent through the air tubes, using the ladder the repairmen use, and figured that if I just kept going up I would eventually get out. As I crawled towards freedom, I switched on the camera, starting the live feed to every family in the Mall. "Hello everyone. My name is Eden. And I wanted to be an artist. But the Committee told me I couldn't. How many of you have been

told the same thing? How many of you want to choose your own future? How many of you want to live without having to be just an ordinary person? Well, I want to be extraordinary. And let me tell you all that I will not stay somewhere where I cannot express myself, where I am not allowed to follow my dreams and do what I want to do!”

I do not remember what I said after that, because as I reached the next tube I saw light from the outside, and felt the air against my skin. And I smelled it. It was the most beautiful smell, a crisp fresh smell. As I reached the end, I poked my head out, and immediately had to shield my eyes as I was painfully blinded for a moment. Once my eyes recovered from what I realized was the sun, I clambered out and walked to the edge of the roof. The edge of the Mall. I saw so many new things. Birds flying in the wind. And the trees, oh, the trees! There were so many! The trees I had always dreamed of were all there; the most wonderful forest, even prettier than I had ever imagined. I panned the camera around so everyone in the Mall could see what I was seeing. The most beautiful thing in the world was just that—the world! And I was finally in it, and out of the Mall. It was just so amazing. This new world was beckoning to me. I faced the camera, and said, “Anyone who wants to start over, where we can be truly free to do what we choose to do—bring seeds, clothes, and whatever you would like, and come and join me out here, on the outside.” With that, I turned off the camera, satisfied with the message I had sent the people of the Mall, hoping I had left an impression. As I neared the edge, a sign read “fire escape,” but there was no fire there, just a large staircase leading down. I climbed down the “fire escape” on the outside of the Mall, and when I reached the bottom I jumped to the ground.

I landed softly on something I had only ever seen in books: grass. It was green, and beautiful. I got up and walked towards the forest, and as I entered through the trees, there was so much to see I had to sit down. It took me a few minutes to take in the enormity of the trees, but I knew before I did anything else I had to make what the books called a “campsite,” and a shelter. Then I could do what I came here to do. Draw. There was so much I had never seen, I was afraid that if I lived 100 years I would never draw it all.

After a chilly night in the forest, I awoke to the sounds of birds singing, squirrels running, other creatures I had only seen in books. As I sat down for some food, wondering what to do next, I heard a noise from the direction of the Mall. I looked over and saw something that shocked me.

I saw what looked like bags dropping to the grass. Then people began to appear, men, women, even children, coming from the roof of the Mall, down the ladder. I couldn't believe my eyes. I ran towards them. There were at least 30, all with suitcases and bags. I greeted them all and pointed them towards my campsite. I then saw Brady jumping down from the ladder, and ran over to him, and we hugged for a long time before letting go. Then we all went over to the forest and got settled in the "campsite" I had created. Some people decided to plant the seeds they had brought over from the Mall. No one knows if we, or the seeds, will grow outside of the Mall, but we have to find out. So they are planting them in a grass meadow on the outskirts of the forest right now.

I cannot believe so many people feel the way I did. I asked them, "Are you artists like me?" Some said yes, but most said no. One is an aspiring chef who could have never been a chef in the Mall because he wasn't born into it. Others want to write stories, or be scientists, or doctors, or teachers. Every one has a different dream. And sitting here now, writing this, with all these people around me, makes me realize why they are really all here. It made me realize that one thing drove all these people to leave and start again. What could they possibly want that would make them choose to leave? The same thing that I wanted. The same thing that drove me to leave.

Freedom.