

The fair came only once a year, and today was that day. The families of the town quickly finished their breakfast and then set out on their trek to the marshy fairgrounds, postponing their duties till tomorrow. On the walk there, the children were antsy. Their youthful eyes darted from right to left, hoping to catch the first glimpse of the gigantic Ferris wheels and colorful booths.

Henry, a boy of average height and fair hair, spotted the fair first – his eyes widening, he pointed and screamed, “There it is!” He was the most excited in the group of children, and was barely able to finish his sentences. He jumped up and down, his skin tingling with electricity and energy. His mother grabbed his wrist, whispered a harsh *stop it* to him and pulled his outstretched arm down. She was an apprehensive soul, but today she felt unusually more agitated.

The fairgrounds appeared from the corner of their eyes and then slowly danced to the center of their vision, covering the omnipresent overcast sky. The kids breathed in the air simultaneously, as if it contained magic and one whiff of it could break the spell. The adults looked at each other knowingly and remained solemn.

For the fifth time, the harvest had been unsuccessful. The adults wanted to lash out at the people who had chastised the farmers to plant crops more “effectively.” *What a joke their instructions had been*, Henry’s father thought with displeasure. *If only...* He shivered and abruptly stopped his train of thought. He could not think those thoughts; it was time to move forward.

The parents’ minds were detached from the hysteria around them. Ms. Pelkin, a gray and far-sighted woman who talked excessively, said (after several few hacks from her trachea), “At least we still got this fair.”

The fair, with its liveliness and vibrancy, seemed to clash with the dismal sky and the dull factories surrounding the event. The bedazzled sign reading “Welcome!” in Broadway style lettering even lost its sparkle in the gloom.

However, when the families hiked under the “Welcome!” sign and entered the fair, they began to relax. The atmosphere was alive with chatter, interrupted sentences, squeals from the children and high-pitched laughs; it was an awe-inspiring experience to the citizens of a normally quiet town, who did not speak unless they needed milk or a postage stamp. The villagers were normally reserved, as there was almost nothing positive to think, much less say. At the fair, however, the adults found that it was possible to hold a conversation longer than one minute without even mentioning the weather. A few of the older adults could not absorb the myriad of sights and overwhelming emotions, and as a result, retired to their homes early on.

The kids excitedly marched in a single file line through a lane of booths smelling of popcorn and candy. At the end of the path, they found treasure: the arcade. They stayed there for an hour; the sounds of clicking and mechanical beeps were the only noises heard. Afterwards, they came back for lunch: beef and corn sandwiches. It was far from their favorite, but they knew they could not *think* of whining, much less utter their complaints. They marched back through the lane of booths into the mess hall. They wanted so desperately to play a game, but they could not be late. Their brown regulation shoes winked at the fog settling on the fairgrounds while making tiny footprints on the ground.

While the kids marched in, Mr. Vampoon sat on a bench, observing the others just like he would every morning from his rocking chair on the porch of the General Goods store. Nobody knew what he was thinking of when he slowly rocked back and forth, but the citizens were not worried. If the thoughts were any way undesirable, *they* would catch him.

From his vantage point, he saw a young girl attempting in vain to release her hair from the imprisonment of the regulation ponytail holder, but she immediately stopped, shivered and mechanically tied her hair back up into a perfect **ponytail with no stray hairs**. He watched two young boys bend to pull down their constricting socks, but just as they folded their bodies, their eyes stretched across their faces and they hastily straightened their backs and arched their shoulders again. Mr. Vampoon shook his head softly. He knew something was going to happen this afternoon – he could feel it. *If only it didn't have to be one of the children*, he started, but a tiny shock stopped him from finishing his sentence. Few seconds later, after gathering his bearings, he smiled nonchalantly as if nothing happened.

Henry sat eating his beef and corn sandwich at a table with his parents. Henry's mother shifted in her seat, her actions abrupt and jerky. Henry's father tried his best to soothe her by patting her back and kissing her apple-red cheeks. Henry sighed. He did not enjoy the plastic-tasting food and thought it was too hot to be wearing the uniform all children were required to wear. He thought of taking his thick, mud brown jacket off, but not before a small bout of electricity shocked him as a warning. He shrugged off the static and peeled his jacket from his shirt.

“Henry!” His mother leaped up from her seat. “Put that jacket back on!” she cried. She was on the verge of tears. The adults sitting nearest to them, with their backs upright and bellies out, looked at her with sympathy.

“No, ma. It's way too hot.” He threw the jacket onto the ground. *I don't care what they say – how can they expect me to wear this?* Suddenly everyone – including the little children who were just laughing moments before – turned around to witness Henry's downfall. They

watched with curious terror. Mr. Vampoon shook his head, the forced smile plastered on his face.

Electricity surged throughout Henry's body again. Another warning.

"Henry, please be a good boy and put on your jacket. Please, I beg you Henry," Henry's mother wailed. She could not let this happen, not *this*.

"No! I'm tired of being told what to do. Ya'll are so scared and manipulated," He replied back defiantly.

Henry felt strong. He knew he was breaking the rules, yet he felt empowered. He believed he was going to start a revolution. A thousand thoughts fluttered in his mind along with several more electrical shocks. However, he pressed on; his spirit was gaining momentum – he had to say something now.

As he was about to speak, a strong electrical charge flowed through his bloodstream. "Ouch!" He yelled. His mother gasped in horror, her body suddenly paralyzed. "No, no, no, please don't make it happen," she bawled. Large tears streamed down her face and splattered onto the ground.

"Son, you have to stop these antics and put your jacket back on." Henry's father tried to remain calm and dignified. But his cool façade was fading – for the first time in his life, he felt truly scared.

Henry shook his head defiantly. He stepped onto the platform that used to be for the band before it was banished, took a deep breath, and faced the audience whose mouths were hanging like gaping o's. He declared, "No. I've had enough." Another electrical shock of larger quantity ran through his system, but his psyche was not phased. He persisted.

He proclaimed, “Before, we were so scared of each other and unable to trust our neighbors and ourselves. The world was full of crime, and we wanted to stop people from thinking bad thoughts, so we had a bunch of people we have never seen before read our minds and censor not only our actions, but the things we think by giving us these small shocks as warnings. That way, no one acts out of line and no one can commit a crime – or at least, by surprise, anyway. That’s great, but by monitoring our ideas, they hold hostage our” – Henry searched for a word in his premature eleven year-old mind – “individuality. I can’t even take off my own jacket! How stupid is that. Their reason *they* say is that all us young’uns need good manners. But our thoughts are personal and none of any’un’s beeswax. I am sick and tired of them controlling us. We should be scared at the unlimited power those mind-readers have. This here is an act of *oppression.*” He spat the last words out, trying to make the situation look as dire as he could. By the time he finished his rant, he had been shocked a total of three times. The jolts were excruciating, and each one was longer and more agonizing than the last. The attacks had left his innards shaking. His face was red and sweaty, and his breathing was unsteady. Almost at the point of collapse, Henry was a truly pitiful sight, but no one cared enough to help him. In fact, the audience’s expressions were blank and inquiring, and some of the adults looked amused. *How long can he last?* Ms. Pelkin thought, wondering if she should place a bet.

Henry gazed at the throng of people in wonder - they were his friends and his neighbors. However, as he stared at the expressionless faces, he could not recognize them now. The lack of response startled him.

He knew he had crossed the line. *They* were coming. He could feel it. He thought to himself, *Would there be a punishment? If there is, will it hurt? There couldn't be one. I'm only eleven.* However, he knew that he had the choice to hold his tongue, but he chose not to.

This has never happened before, he moaned to himself quietly. He never personally knew of anyone who defied the rules.

Henry could barely see straight. Regret sank into his heart. He felt so weak; he lost that peculiar feeling of authority – it was gone, drained from his youthful soul. Henry's voice of reason finally returned, but a moment too late. *What are they going to do to me?* He asked himself.

His parents would know what to do. Now, more than ever, Henry needed protection. *Ma and Pops will protect me,* he thought vainly. Still standing on the platform, he turned in their direction, his voice trembling, “What are they going to do me?” His voice cracked near the end, but his eyes did not waver in intensity. He expected his parents to reach out. He expected them to say it will all be fine, that he was *their* baby, and *they* would not let anybody lay a hand on him.

But his mother and father, both subdued and disheartened that their child turned out to be a criminal, looked away. Henry whispered, “Please, no, ma and pops. Don’t leave me. I’m sorry!” He blurted out the words, staring wildly into the crowd’s eyes. “There I said it!” He closed and then opened his eyes, hoping to see arms welcoming him back into society. *Maybe they thought it was all a joke,* Henry imagined.

But there was no such thing. Only patient eyes staring back at him.

To them, Henry was dangerous and a threat to society.

The crowd wanted order.

It finally came.

“Henry, Henry, Henry,” announced the black-bearded man standing at the entrance of the fair. He was annoyed from having to bust another criminal. A group of men carrying guns were spread out behind him. It was not the black-bearded man’s stature that caused the mob of fair-

goers to shudder (for he was short and stout), but the immense power that he held. The black-bearded man pointed at Henry and pressed a red button.

Henry's body abruptly shook and fell to the platform. Richard Lusack walked up and coughed. He had a cold ever since the beginning of harvest. *I must do something about it*, he ruminated to himself. He patted his chest three times and opened his mouth:

"Ladies and gentlemen, you should know who I am, but I will introduce myself again for your sakes," he proclaimed proudly and dramatically – he had always loved the attention. He smiled wildly and mischievously. "I am Richard Lusack, and I, along with a special few devoted to the welfare of society, listen to every single thought of yours – even those nasty ones you don't want anyone to know." He rotated his body slightly in Mr. Vampon's direction and smiled even wider. Richard Lusack, however, broke his train of thought to wipe a sweat from his brow. It was truly a hot day – Richard Lusack felt he should do something about that too.

"As you know, it is because of human's evil nature which we have created this system. All of you standing here have the potential to become a criminal. You have all thought of committing horrible deeds. But this device that we implanted into your body has stopped you from carrying them out – well, most of you, anyways. There are a certain few, like Henry, who have chosen to walk a dark path." He paused; he loved adding dramatic moments of silence. "This is not an 'act of oppression.'" He snorted loudly and coughed again. "This is for the safety of all. If a person's thoughts go unfiltered, who knows what he or she might do? Look at Henry. He was completely *mad*. If not for us dedicated mind readers, he might have tried to physically harm you." Ms. Pelkin nodded her head violently in agreement. "All those years trying to find ways to prevent crime – ha! A joke. Ever since this was created, there has been zero crime. *Zero.*" He scratched his beard, which had begun to itch. He licked his lips and began again. "So

what if a small freedom is given up? It is necessary for order and peace, which we have now."

He closed and opened eyes, fully expecting applause. He was right. Everyone was applauding - even Henry's mother and father, both of whom firmly believed in Richard Lusack's capabilities and motives. Mr. Vampoon sat dumbly, the electricity having subdued his furtive feelings for Henry's justice. In a thunderstorm of applause, Richard Lusack stepped down from the platform, leaving behind Henry's fallen body elevated for all to see. The claps continued.