

I blankly stared out the blurred window, watching the trees sway in the gentle wind and the birds swoop through the air like jets in a rigorous dog fight. Though their movements were tense, rigid and often unpredictable, they appeared joyous; engulfed in the free, open air and the scent of freshly bloomed roses. My jealousy rose higher and higher as the two robins playfully hopped through the air closer and closer to the approaching steel gate. Finally, after little hesitation they flew over the barrier with ease, with no effort at all. I sighed, if only it were that easy. If only I were a careless bird whisking through the air like the free creatures they are.

Mr. Armstrong, my current English teacher was a major fan of lectures. I felt more trapped in one of his rants than I did in the gates that surrounded me. He spoke about how important the written language was, clearly skipping the point to tell us how important *our* written language was. His words focused too much on past writers rather than present writers for me to even be remotely interested in his speech. That's what my world always seemed to be about, the past but not the present. My elders and peers wish to rejoice in the ideals of generations before, yet refuse to discuss current predicaments that more or less shape our lives.

It only makes sense though, for our present state of the community was something that couldn't be changed by anyone inside the Wall. No one would save us, not even ourselves. We were doomed to live our lives forever and always inside a prison, encased in our own bubble of hope. It will always be in vain though.

"Ms. Reed, am I boring you?" My teacher yelled from the front of the room, his hand placed annoyingly on his hip.

As a matter of fact, yes. "No."

"Well then, would you care to indulge us in the writings of Mark Forman? I'm sure you were listening to our current discussion."

Great. "Of course I was, your words speak to me." I replied, hoping that he wouldn't catch on to my subtle tone of sarcasm.

"Clearly they do." His words were harsh but I ignored him since his sudden anger would soon dissipate and I would be left back where I was, looking longingly out the locked and more or less imprisoning windows.

Soon after the bell rang and a maddening rush of students flooded out of classrooms and into the desolate hallway, I collected my text books and found myself sluggishly moving towards the door and robotically opening the seemingly heavy wooden frame. In truth, the moment school ended everyday was the happiest moment of the long hours spent in my life. We were taught from an early

age that school was a place for us to learn the rules and find our place in this withering world, but I found no joy in this search for self placement.

How could anyone feel the least bit of excitement when learning about our past dictators and our 'legendary' writers who only wrote about one opinion and only one state of mind? It angered me to know that no matter how much they encourage us to be a part of greatness, we never would.

It was all because of the Wall.

Years ago when I was five, when my mother was still alive, I would walk up to the Wall and ask my mother, "Why is this here, why do they keep us in here?" my voice must've sounded so pained and so saddening. It wasn't a surprise when my mother cried. She did that a lot, crying.

Her answer was what any mother would say to a five year old, "It's because they know how special we are and they want to keep us separate from everyone else." Her words were choked with tears as her face grew red and her body collapsed on the mud ridden ground beneath us.

Those were the final memories I ever had with her before she died. But that was all in the past and this was now. It took me a couple of years for someone to take mercy on me and finally tell me the truth about the Wall. I discovered that we weren't special at all, we were just sick. At first, my young mind couldn't comprehend the man's words. Sure I had contracted the flu a couple of times but I never felt truly sick. But the full nature of it was that we all were, more than anyone could have ever imagined in the early stages.

When I turned sixteen, the story was finally told to me. After that, nothing had ever been the same. My world shriveled up and I couldn't seem to bring it back to its full youth. Every realization seemed to crush some other part of my life and I couldn't seem to mend the pieces.

It all started with the plague that ravaged our country. We lived off the land in our earlier years of civilization but a plague began to ruthlessly destroy our crops from one field to the next. No one could explain this phenomenon since the soil was still fertile and rich and there had been no drought to affect the growth cycle. Before then, nothing horrifically terrifying had ever happened to the country until the virus, this devastating plague, reached a stage in its evolution where it began attacking humans.

The beginning of its present life originated with a farmer who was desperate for food due to his failed crop growth. He knew all too well that if there was no supply of food, his family and he would starve. They scoured the land for any usable soil that hadn't been affected by the virus but none seemed to be found until they reached one living plant.

The farmer was so overcome with joy he didn't even think to consider that the plant had been affected but hadn't yet died. He ate the fruit that grew upon it and was the first person to become

infected. By coincidence, it was the only plant known that beheld the one mutated chromosome in the virus that would allow itself to feed off of humans.

He lived his life from then on unaware that he held this deadly disease and unwillingly carried it on to his family and many other families to come. When the man and his family died of an unknown cause, colonies caught wind of the unknown plague.

It was centuries after when doctors were around to diagnose the issue that they discovered the cause of so many deaths. At that time, we were ruled by an over powering dictator named Griffin Young who demanded a way to scan if a person was carrying the virus since a human rarely showed any signs before it was to late. Someone could have it their whole lives without becoming sick before their sudden death.

One day per month was set into stone for everyone to be scanned by a machine that would read if you were a carrier. Everyone who was pronounced positive was sent for imprisonment inside the Wall. The sick built their own colony within the confines of the Wall before dying one by one. Others like me, who were born here, had no choice but to stay.

Every month a new batch of sick arrive through the Griffin Gate on the far side of the colony. We welcome them with open arms, smiles of confidence and hope yet we all know their fate. We all know *our* fate.

As I exited the building, I couldn't help but admire the sky. It was mid afternoon and the sun still held strong in the heights of the universe, penetrating the atmosphere and laying its tepid rays upon my clammy skin. When I looked at the sun during the day or the moon at night, I couldn't help but imagine the liberated soul on the other side of the Wall who was also staring knowingly at the thing of beauty hanging in the sky. That person would know I was here and I would know they were there, but we couldn't do anything. Only look at it and think of each other and the different lives we lived and how changed our lives would be if only for a second we could switch places.

It was a pointless imagination, something I used to picture in my youth, but it still gave me hope that some day, whether in my lifetime or in my children's, the Wall would collapse and we could walk out onto a field of grass without any words, only the presence of liberation, the presence of freedom.

"Florence!" A voice yelled, "Florence!" it screamed again. I couldn't seem to find the person who hollered my name so I continued walking down the path to the local market. Suddenly a panting soul could be heard beating the ground down with his pounding stride. "It seems you're ignoring me." I quickly turned around.

"Gabriel, if I knew it was you I wouldn't have ignored you. Besides, if someone's yelling my name I assume if they want to see me that bad they can come and find me themselves." Gabriel was

my one and only friend. He seemed to understand my outlook on life and our situation like no one else. There wasn't a day in time where we never saw each other.

"You were always so forthcoming." He teased; his smile bright with laughter. After a few more steps, it suddenly became deathly serious, causing my stride to slow. "Have you heard any news from our friend on the other side?" he intensely asked, his body and words now uncomfortably close.

"If I heard from her you would be the first to know, Gabriel."

"So is the plan still set then, are we finally going to escape?"

"Don't ask a question you already know the answer to. She said tonight, so tonight it will be." I stated.

"Florence, can you at least seem a little excited about this." He groaned, "We are finally escaping and you can't even smile. What's the matter?"

I abruptly stopped walking, "What's the matter, you ask? The matter is that a number of things can go wrong. What if an outsider other than our friend catches wind of our plan, what then? If they knew we were trying to escape, Griffin would send numbers of soldiers in here to kill us all off! I'm surprised he hasn't done it all ready. It's a blessing he even lets us live. I want to escape more than you know but we are also risking the lives of countless others."

Gabriel took a few moments to let my words sink in, "So are going to give up then?"

"No, Gabriel, we are going to escape. But no one else comes, for their safety and ours." He nodded as if I were his commanding officer. We continued in unison stride to the market and past the reaches of the pubic, to my lonely house on the outskirts of the colony. It was dangerously close to the Wall, but I never minded, it was my constant reminder that there was more to my life than being trapped in here.

Once we were safely inside, Gabriel left no spare time before he grabbed a small backpack out of an abandoned closet in the corner of the house. Watching him as I sat down in an old, water damaged, wooden chair, putting my feet on the decaying kitchen table, I noticed his tenseness. Both of us stayed under the radar for most of our lives, trying to go unnoticed so that if a time like this happened no one would suspect anything as we slipped under the cover of night.

But Gabriel was always the one insisting we stay out of trouble and giving me guidance before I did anything reckless. So now, for him to suddenly go against every moral and rule we had been taught since childhood, must've been taking its toll on his mental confidence.

"This is going to work, Gabriel." I firmly insisted. He paused only for a moment to register my words, but quickly went back to packing the backpack full of supplies. "Stop what you're doing for a second and look at me, please." He did as I said. "No matter what happens you've been with me

through all of this and I want to thank you for that. There is another world out there for us to explore and I'm glad to be exploring it with you."

His humorous aroma returned, for when the conversation became emotionally serious he flipped a switch to lighten the mood. "Likewise." He said the words with a magnificent smile plastered across his pale face, but I knew that deep down he was truly glad as well. That's the one thing I liked about Gabriel, we both understood each other deeper than what our words could possibly say.

"What are you packing?" I finally asked after a quick silence in conversation.

"Canned food, a blanket, first aid kit, water, things like that. We don't know what this outside world is like compared to in here so I want to make sure we are completely prepared."

"But didn't our friend on the other side say she would have supplies waiting for us?" I asked.

"She did, but do you really trust this person?"

"Yes, but it seems you don't."

He took brief pauses while rummaging the house to speak, "If you think about it, what person would help two people escape a place quarantined because of a deadly disease. She would be crazy to trust that we don't have the virus."

"Maybe she trusts easily. Besides we haven't contracted it yet. The doctors have checked over and over again. They even have the scanners the outside world has."

"I realize that but do you think she does?"

"Do you really think she is setting us up? There would be no reason for her to do so."

"Maybe, but there could be a chance that Griffin has masterminded this whole thing just to see the lengths we will go to in order to escape. Maybe then he will decide if, now that it is possible for us to escape, he should terminate the entire colony. The only reason he hasn't I suppose is because the outside world may still have some morals left and would rebel if they knew the lengths *he* would go to."

"We have to believe that it isn't true though. That's the only way for us to ever get out of here, we have to trust others and believe that Griffin is less of a wit than we understand him to be." I stated, hoping my words would comfort his fears as well as mine.

"I'm done." He finally said. "The sun is nearly down. We should get on our way."

I firmly nodded as he threw me one of the backpacks and we left the house. Strangely enough I didn't dare look back. I knew that if things went according to plan, I would never lay eyes on my broken down stick-hill-of-a-shelter ever again. So many memories had been made there from my childhood up until now. I had both laughed and cried, fell and got back up, searched and became who I am now. It was also the home of the many memories of my family.

My mother, whose laugh could produce a smile from even the most tortured soul. My father, who's rough smell and broad shoulders portrayed strength yet his touch, was so kind and gentle that your heart would melt between his finger tips. And lastly, my sister, who lived her life with few words, but when she did speak those few words they would unearth life at its core and show the beauty of the little things.

The memories I held of them were the only thing that kept their spirit alive inside me. But now it was all in vain since the last and most significant piece of it all was disappearing into the light as we approached population, farther and farther away from my past.

It seemed like we were walking for hours on end but in reality it was only minutes before we reached our point of destination. It was an old tunnel that had been found when we were first sent here. It was part of a long forbidden chain of rules. This one was almost first on the list; *don't go into the tunnel.*

Surprisingly enough, the cellar like door that stood at the entrance to our beacon of hope, stood unguarded and unlocked. I found it a bit ironic how they forbid us to enter it yet they neglected to lock it from us. I wasn't complaining though, our escape wouldn't be possible if it weren't for this.

As we approached the cellar door I couldn't help but think about how much I was going to miss this place. I wasn't much of a person here but it was still my home, and the only place I ever knew. The unknown of the outside world scared me yet I still continued on, refusing to let myself be over run by my fears.

The cellar door was far from where people could see, but the night sky hadn't yet reached its peak in darkness for us to go fully unnoticed. For this reason my heart pounded out of my chest as if someone were physically pumping it to run faster and faster and faster.

"You may do the honors." I said to Gabriel. To him it may have been a kind gesture, but for me it was a way to escape the reality of my coming future.

Gabriel didn't hesitate a moment before thrusting the door open. It wasn't a surprise to find the steps that led down to the tunnel completely engulfed in darkness. Quickly, before my imagination got the better of me, I grabbed a flashlight out of my bag and let its radiant light flood onto the staircase.

It wasn't much of a staircase since it only had three steps, but it still felt like the longest steps of my life. The tunnel, once we had fully entered into it, was exactly like I expected. There was no sign of mankind, just the earth and the filthy dirt that occupied it.

"Here take this map. She threw it over the wall yesterday just in case her instructions weren't clear enough." Gabriel said.

We were always taught that these tunnels, no matter what route you took, would lead to a dead end. But they were wrong. There was one smaller tunnel that went unnoticed since many thought that, due to its small size, it must've been a failed attempt at an expansion, or so our friend said.

Once we found it though, I understood why they thought such a thing. Its width was just enough for my body to fit in from shoulder to shoulder, but I didn't mind the tightness, it made me feel even more excited to know that she hadn't been playing around with us and that this tunnel actually existed.

From what she had told us, if we followed this tunnel it was a straight shot under the Wall and to another cellar door on the other side, where she would be waiting. By this time in our escape you would think my heart rate would have elevated far beyond what it was before, but it hadn't. If anything it had gone down for I was too excited with the joy of our freedom to even consider the danger we were putting ourselves in.

Dirt fell from the walls and onto our clothes, making us appear as if we had been wrestling in the filth. My hair began to weigh on me as it collected more and more of the substance. Gabriel, after every five seconds, would complain about something getting into his mouth. I gladly ignored it and happily accepted my filthiness as the dress of escape.

After a while though, when the tunnels winding trail refuse to end, I grew tired of the cramped space and absence of air. It felt as if I were being slowly crushed. Every instinct was telling me to turn around but we had made it too far for it to even be a consideration. So we walked and walked and walked until our feet grew tired and our lungs gasped for air heavy with dirt.

Finally, when my hope was growing thin, we reached a large open area in the tunnel, identical to the one we were in when we first entered. I knew right when my eyes lay sight on the steps that we were free. Without hesitation I grabbed Gabriel and embraced him into a hug I didn't want to unravel from. My thoughts hadn't really wrapped themselves around the idea of escaping until now.

Tears began to roll down my cheeks like a soft rain that began to whip away the dirt from my skin. My smile seemed to speak words of joy itself as I radiated the most hopeful glow that I pictured lighting up the tunnel.

"This time, you do the honors." Gabriel whispered into my ear as he slowly let me slip from his arms.

There was no mistaking the cellar doors that were above the stairs. For me they were like grandly embroidered golden doors forged from the finest hands from the finest material. Just the feeling of touching that gold was enough for me to lose all memories of the hurt and pain that I tried to leave behind. I thrust open the doors into the new world.

But what lay waiting for me on the other side was the worst nightmare you could ever think of. Flood lights engulfed me and Gabriel, blinding us for a moment in time. Suddenly forceful hands gripped our arms and plucked us from the tunnel and nailed us to the ground with an overpowering strength. This was clearly not the greeting we were expecting.

I tried to catch sight of anything, but the man kneeling over me prevented me from looking at anything but the ground. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" a woman yelled from somewhere near. I could only assume it was directed towards us. Shortly after I heard a string of struggles around me and soon the woman was silent.

The next voice I heard was calm and collected. The only outstanding emotion I could catch wind of was anger, pure and evil anger, "Do you children really think that escaping will be that easy. Griffin now knows that you and your infestation are willing to escape and are not satisfied with your current life. He will be informed that your people have retaliated." The man paused for a second, seeming to collect himself for a moment. Suddenly my head was thrust to the side and I was met eye to eye with the man.

His complexion was winter pale; his eye's as dismal and lonely as the night sky. They showed pain yet an angered revenge of some sort. From my quick glance he was older, but it only made him seem more lethal and unpredictable.

"Griffin has let you live in peace for centuries and you just think that he will be content with this. It is a selfish and threatening thing you've done by coming out here with your virus like this."

Without any hesitation I spit directly in his face.

"Well now you will have the virus!" I screamed. It was in vain though because I knew that I wasn't a carrier and my actions wouldn't affect him. But his next words shocked me the most.

"Don't worry sweetheart, I've been given the immunity shot, there's no way I'm getting this silly virus from you."

"You mean you've found a cure for it!" I yelled.

"An immunity, and yes a cure." He said with an evil smile.

I began to violently squirm. "Even with the cure you let these people die! You let them live their lives knowing their destined fate!"

"Griffin feels fine with it, so do I."

"You're cruel and evil, how can you possibly live with yourself?!"

He laughed the most sinister laugh that would break the kindest soul down to a cold shiver. If this was the type of people the outside world had, I didn't know if I wanted to see any more of it. "I live with myself by doing 'cruel and evil' things such as this. I feed off of it little girl and my food for today will be you two. So who wants to die first?"