

**First Place**  
**Middle School**

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**Expressionless**

By Elise Blaauw

I used to want to be smart. To be a genius like everyone else. To be the same.

But I am smart. I know that now. I have to remind myself every day, lest I lose the one grain of hope I have left.

So maybe all the other eight graders are learning trigonometry, and the really smart ones have moved on to statistics, while I'm still processing Algebra 1 from fifth grade. Maybe I'm confused when my teacher babbles in Latin and Greek. Maybe I get a little lost when our music teacher talks about the fractal patterns in Bach's work. Maybe it hurts a little. Maybe it hurts more than a little.

Maybe it hurts a lot.

But I know one thing. I understand people. It took me until sixth grade to know how to spell psychology, but I understood it long before. I can tell when people are lying, when they mean what they say, when they have a fake smile. In other words, I can see through it all. At least I could, if there was anything to see behind it.

Maybe it surprises you when I say that they're empty. I don't know what else would be there. There's your brain to process information, eyes, ears and nose to gather more and mouth to pass it on. I've read in books about people whose voices crack with emotion, eyes that shine with happiness or flash in anger.

Then I look at the real world, and I know it's not true. Not true at all.

"Samantha Wilkins, if you do not put down that stack of papers right now, so help me, I will chuck them out the window!" Ms. Ellington says. The words come out even and flat at first, but they peak in the end, like she just remembered that they're supposed to do that when she's mad.

"It's a book, Ms. Ellington," I say, slowly shutting *Harry Potter and the Sorcerers Stone*, a book I dug out of my basement a long time ago. "You told us to read."

"That is not a book, it is foolish gibberish and trash that will fill your mind with silly ideas. When I said read, I intended for you to read your spelling book to improve your vocabulary, which I dare say could use it. How many pages have you memorized yet?" She stares at me, unblinking, making me squirm uncomfortably.

"One," I say weakly. She pauses a moment, then slowly drags the corners of her mouth down in an over exaggerated frown, reminding me of a kid about to throw a temper tantrum.

I pick up the big, worn textbook from under my desk, letting it fall with a thump before me. Ms. Ellington sends another frown my direction. Ever since they stopped printing books everyone has started treating the textbooks we have like they're worth millions of dollars.

But no one cares about *real* books. Books with plots, characters, stories. Books that end, instead of just moving on to the next volume, then the next and the next.

I flip the speller open to the second page, trying in vain to focus on the words before me. The letters seem to peel of the page, swirling around me, forming new words. Words of adventure and excitement. In between the lines I see wizards battling, kids sword fighting, four children standing in a snowy wood.

I rest my head in my hands, listening to the melody of whispers from the studying kids. I wonder how they do it. Then again, I don't think they know anything else. It's like imagination is a foreign term to them. Every kid wears the same thing to school; jeans and a white t-shirt. It's not because of the dress code, it's because they can't come up with anything else. Food is the same everywhere you look. Dull, tasteless bread. Everything in this world is the same.

The bell rings, one short rude note. I slam my spelling book shut and grab my stuff to go.

"You don't try hard enough." It's the first thing out of my friend Zoe's mouth. She doesn't even look at me, for all I know she could be talking to a wall. I just shrug. There's no point telling her that no matter how hard I try, I just don't understand the things she does. "I'll help you study," Zoe decides. I shake my head again.

"You've tried that before. You know it doesn't work. I'm just..." My words trail off. I'm what? Dumb? Strange? Unnatural? "I'm just different."

"No," Zoe says firmly. "You just don't try."

I let Zoe believe what she wants. It's strange that we're friends, the smartest and the dumbest girls in the school. I know why though. Zoe couldn't care less about my education. But if she could accomplish the impossible and get me to learn things, it would make her look even better. It's sad the way she tries to hide her true motives. I can see her fooling even herself, but to me it's plain as day, as though someone wrote the words on her in scarlet letters.

I yank my backpack out of my locker. Zoe follows me to the bike racks.

"I'll come over to your house," she decides. "And we can study together."

I say nothing, unlocking my hover board and getting on, floating an inch above ground.

"See you then," Zoe says. I nod shortly, then take off, weaving between people in my rush to leave the hated school grounds. I slow as I approach the neighborhoods, letting my wavy brown hair fly out behind me. *This must be what flying is like*, I think. I've read in books about people mastering magic, defying gravity. If people today would use their intelligence to do something like that, then we really would be able to fly. People only focus on "realistic" and material things, and flying is out of the question.

I jump off the board when I reach my house. Glancing at the lawn, I see that the cleaning bot has done it again. I pick up a smooth round stone and chuck it at the center of the yard. It's my contribution to this world. One stone out of place in a country full of identical houses. But it isn't just an act of rebellion. It's my tribute to my father. When my mom told me he was dead, I asked where he was buried. My mom just looked at me.

"We don't bury dead people, Samantha. We burn them, like all other waste." Waste. Is that what humans are when they no longer add intelligence to the world?

I fling open the door and tromp up the stairs to my room, not bothering to greet my mother. She won't be happy to see me, even though she tries to appear so. She'd wish that I stayed at school for a study club, or tutoring session. She'd wish I was smarter. People go around trying to make their face look right, but when you actually look at it, it just looks wrong and disproportionate.

I set down my back pack and pull out Harry Potter, setting it gently on my bedside table. I knew it was risky taking it to school, but I was at such an exciting part. But now I want something closer. Something more believable.

From under my mattress I pull out *Little House in the Big Woods*. My eyes skim the pages hungrily, searching for something to hold onto, something I can find in my life. There's nothing. I pause a moment, coming across a word in the text that bothers me, like an itch in a place you just can't reach.

Tears. I ponder the word. *Her face was wet with tears*. Wet. What are tears, that they are wet like water, but different? I pull forth another word. Crying. Crying, tears, wet. I pick up my dictionary, but neither word is defined.

I hear footsteps climbing the stairs, drawing closer. They're too light to belong to my mother. Zoe. I hastily stuff the book back under the bed.

"Hello," Zoe flings the door open. Her eyes land on Harry Potter and she gives me a disapproving look that is more like a grimace. "You know those things are illegal. If Ms. Ellington hadn't been so tolerant, you could be in jail all ready."

I snort. I doubt it had anything to do with Ms. Ellington's tolerance. Probably the fact that if she reported the book, government agents would be all over the school and principal, which is not the sort of media she wants.

Zoe spends the whole afternoon lecturing me on math and science. When she asks me if I understand, I just nod again, though it's not even close to the truth.

Zoe smiles, this sort of smile that covers all of her face but her eyes. People's eyes these days are always the same. I long to sink into one of my books where they change. But when I think about it too much, that seems weird too. I mean, eyes that light up like light bulbs or swirl around. I don't know what I want anymore.

"Zoe?" I ask, stopping her as she turns to go. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Go for it," Zoe says, flipping her curly red hair over one shoulder.

“What are tears?”

All of Zoe freezes. She stops breathing, her eyes glazing over as though she’s seeing straight through the wall into a far away land. For a second I’m scared that I’ve killed her. Then she moves again, a harsh jerk bringing her back to reality.

“I’m sorry, I must have misheard you.”

She didn’t. Her smile is clear as glass, and behind it I see her panicking, the wheels and clogs in her head spinning at a maniac pace, trying to come up with an answer.

“How about crying?” I persist. “What does crying mean?”

Again, Zoe is at a loss, totally and completely overwhelmed.

“You’re making stuff up,” she decides, nodding as she ponders the idea. “Yeah, that’s it. You’re making it up. Don’t worry about it. Your mind usually does that when your intelligence starts kicking in. You’ll be normal in no time. Actually, this is a good thing.” The more she talks, the more she seems to convince herself until I can see that she believes every word flowing from her mouth.

“Wait a moment,” I stop her as her words finally start to register. “My intelligence?”

“You know,” she looks at me funny, at least funnier than usual. “You’re starting boost.”

My face must betray how confused I am, because after studying me a long moment, she continues.

“The alterations you get as a baby.” None of her words are hitting home. I almost expect her to sigh, or roll her eyes, what all the other kids attempt, but instead she continues on like a robot. “The artificial intelligence everybody has. Most kids feel it’s affects in kindergarten, but it’s possible for things to work out differently. I’m positive you have it. It’s against the law not to. You’re just an outlier. Most people consider that obnoxious, but it proves that sometimes things work out differently...” she rambles on in an even, flat voice.

I clutch my head in my hands. Artificial intelligence. Fake intelligence.

“How do they do it?” I demand suddenly.

“They implant a little computer chip that they hook up to your brain to give you knowledge. It grows with the amount of knowledge you gain...” and off she goes again.

“Did they always do this?” I wonder.

“No,” she tells me. “They started a while back. Before, people weren’t very smart. Kids did foolish things and wasted time, so the government made some changes and here we are, all privileged and smart...” on and on she goes.

Before. Things weren’t always this way. The puzzle pieces start clicking into place. If people weren’t like this before then maybe my books *do* tell the truth. The truth about the past. Maybe those people used to exist. People who’s smiles looked right, who felt, who’s faces and eyes changed. People with expressions and emotions. But they’re gone now.

I know one thing for sure. I am the only human on the planet without that artificial intelligence.

“Why didn’t I get an intelligence boost?” I ask my mother that evening at dinner. I used to be scared to ask direct questions, but then I realized that no matter how touchy the subject, I won’t get a reaction.

My mom chews her tasteless bread. “What?”

“You heard me.”

Her expression doesn’t change. There isn’t one. Her face is vacant, matching her eyes.

“You have them, Samantha. They haven’t come into affect yet.” She doesn’t believe her own words. Neither do I.

“Am I supposed to believe you?” I near the line that I’ve avoided for years. I almost want to make her angry, to get a reaction, to get a mother. Anything to prove to me that she *is*.

I can see her racking her brains for what mask to wear next. Finding nothing suitable, she goes for empty neutrality.

“Of course.” She says it like it’s a no-brainer. Disobedience and distrust come to humans as naturally as flying comes to pigs. *Because they’re programmed that way*, a voice tells me. I ignore it. “Don’t go getting crazy ideas like your father.”

I set down my food. “What did he do?”

If my mother could read expressions, she would have known to stop there. “He made something illegal.” I think about the books I found in our basement. Were those his?

I read between the lines of her answer. He made me. *I’m* the illegal object. I remember Zoe’s words; *It’s against the law not to*.

“Was he smart?” I ask quietly. Maybe he was like me, the one different person in a world of identical people.

“Not incredibly, but he helped design some hover mobiles, which got him on my good side.” It was his imagination that brought him up to my mother’s status.

By the time I go to bed, nine o’clock on the dot, I’ve figured it out. My father was probably like me, his father like him and so on. It started with one person way back at the first chip implants that chose not to have it and passed it on. My father left me my opening to the truth; the books. He knew rules could not constrain me like everyone else.

Still, I lay awake, one question tormenting me. If I’m the human that didn’t get changed, if I’m the original, what is everyone else?

The next day I pull Zoe out of the stream of people.

“Let go.” She says flatly. I cringe. “I need to get to class on time or I’ll-“

“It’s important.” I protest, holding on tight. Zoe looks at me blankly as her mind scrambles to figure out what could possibly be more important than knowledge.

I hesitate a moment, then plug on with the plan I made last night. I need to know.

“It’s your mother,” I tell her confidentially, watching her face. “They found out after you left school that she has a disease. She’s going to die, Zoe,” I whisper. There’s no reaction. “Soon,” I add. “She doesn’t have long to live.”

Zoe just shrugs. “She wasn’t adding anything to the world anyways.”

I shut my eyes and try one last time. “But she’s your *mom*, Zoe. Won’t you... miss her?”

I know her answer before it comes.

I can hardly bear school after that. Walking down the hallways, surrounded by empty people. I can’t stand it, watching the expressionless faces pass by. It was always awful, but now it seems worse, now that I realize how they’re meant to be.

A feeling of hopelessness washes over me. Then strange things start happening. My throat closes up, as though a ball of sticky dough were caught in it. My eyes smart and sting and my breath comes in ragged bursts. Then a tickling sensation rolls down my cheek. I wipe it and stare at my finger through blurred eyes. It’s wet. *Water. Tears.*

I duck my head down and speed along the hallway. But I’m walking slow enough to catch a snippet of a teacher’s conversation.

“-pity, I was hoping it’d turn out. That would be a great success story.”

“I’ll go take care of it,” another says. She turns and walks away.

It. The tightness in my chest grows. It hurts to hear these, these *creatures* talking about the only person with feelings as though I had none.

I do the first thing I think of. I walk right out the door. Leaving school early is strictly prohibited and none of the students would even consider it. I don’t bother with my hover board, breaking into a run as I head home.

I throw myself down on the hard wood furniture. What is wrong with everything? I toss and turn as time escapes unheeded. Why?

The doorbell rings. I sit up, startled. Slowly, I pull myself to my feet.

“Hello?” I pull the door open. A man stands before me, dressed in a spiffy black suit. A sense of dread washes over me.

“Hello,” he says pleasantly. He does a better job at faking emotions, but his eyes are the same as all others. Lifeless. I feel my heart sink. “May I come in?”

“I’m not sure my mom would want me to,” I stammer. He smiles, nonplussed.

“Don’t worry. I’m from the government. I won’t hurt you.”

He’s one of the people implanting artificial intelligence. Anger swirls around me.

As though to prove that I’m not dumb, my mind plucks the trap out of his words. If I don’t let him in, he’ll accuse me of mistrusting the government, and I’ll be in trouble. If I do, then I’ll be in trouble again.

He doesn’t wait for my response, brushing past me. “Thank you.” He shuts the door behind him. I stare at it, my last opening to the rest of the world closed.

“Sit.” He commands. “I was informed that you were seen,” his lips pucker around the vile word. “Crying. You disturbed the peace of the school, I’m afraid.”

“You have my sincere apologies.” I say bluntly, standing up. “I’m sorry to bother you.”

He remains seated. “May I ask you a question?”

I pull back every urge to say no. “Yes.”

“A confused bank teller transposed the dollars and cents when he cashed a check for Ms. Smith, giving her dollars instead of cents and cents instead of dollars. After buying a newspaper for 50 cents, Ms. Smith noticed that she had left exactly three times as much as the original check. What was the amount of the check?”

I stare at him blankly. He sighs convincingly.

“That’s what I thought.” He steps near me, his hand reaching into his coat pocket. “I will regret this.”

But he won’t. His eyes are just like everyone else’s. Blank and expressionless.

