

The saying is simple.

“We are the problem.”

That’s how it is. There’s us and there’s them.

They need to be protected from us.

We are the problem. It’s very simple.

She climbed the four rusty steps to the top bunk and, after some awkward maneuvering, laid down. The flea-ridden pillow under her head smelled of sweat, but it was better than not having one at all. Beneath a faded gray mat, the bed was made of hard iron. Her blanket used to cover all of her and at one time tucked under her feet to keep out the ghosts. But she had grown, out of both the blanket and the fear of vampires and ghouls coming for her in the middle of the night.

The only monsters here are the people.

The bell rang out, the harsh thrum of metal scratching her ears, signaling rest time. The lights underneath her bed flickered out and the cell fell into darkness. Within minutes she could hear the gentle snores of Sixty. While they were both in their fifteenth term, Sixty was on the small side and still gentle, which prompted Sixty-One to call Sixty “Tiny.” Sixty-One was the largest fifteen and had already earned herself a reputation as a troublemaker, as well as five inks. The inks covered her torso, one of them crawling up her right side, ending on her shoulder. That one was a combination of her full number, 17SG14-1061, overlaid with fake stitches to represent where she had gotten knifed by Ninety-Five. After that, the SInS decided that Ninety-Five was too dangerous and she was ended. Only a few in 17SG had ever been ended, but it was to ensure that a very serious problem was eliminated.

The bell rang out again, indicating that the SInS would be coming around to check the cells, and she heard the familiar whirring sound of the bots. Fifty-Nine, Sixty, and Sixty-One were already asleep, and she had learned how to fool the SInS into thinking that she was, too.

Soon the bot moved on to the next cell.

Sighing, she rolled over and pulled the small blanket up to her neck and squeezed her eyes tight.

Within minutes she was asleep.

*The metal wrapped itself around my wrists and ankles, burning my skin with the cold. The shouts echoed all around me, and my cries for help were lost in the cacophony, the sea of screams. **HELP. Help me help someone someone ANYONE! It's not my fault! It's not my fault. It's not my fault...***

*More metal clawed its way around my neck, cracking and crushing my voice. It began to pull me down into the ground, the cold, hard, metal ground, everything is metal, everything is metal, everything is ending, **save me someone someone please!** The doors closed over my head and the light was sliced. **SOMEONE. HELP! ANYON-***

“HELP. Help, someone, help me!” She awoke screaming and clawing at the ceiling, scrambling. “No! Let me out. Help me!” She began pounding on the walls, trying to scratch her way to some sort of safety. Suddenly, she felt warm hands against her back. “NO. NO. No, let go of me! Stop it! Stop it! Stop it....please....” The hands stretched into arms that smoothly wrapped themselves around her and squeezed gently, rocking her back and forth, back and forth.

“It’s just a dream. Fifty-Eight, listen to me. Listen to me. It’s just a dream.”

“NO! Let me go! Let go of me, stop, please! STOP!” She began to scratch at her skin, as if to escape from herself. “Let me...let me...stop..please...” she hugged her knees, bringing them up to her bony chest and started rocking in time with the arms, then let out a strangled sob. “Stop it....”

“Shh. It’s okay. It was only a dream. It’s okay. Shh. Don’t let the SInS hear you. Night disturbances are forbidden by the Integrity Decrees. Shh. It’s me, it’s Fifty-Nine. You’re okay.” The rocking turned into back rubbing which simply ended in a hug. “Come sleep in my bunk. It’s okay.” Slowly, they climbed down the steps to the lower bunk. “It was just a dream, Fifty-Eight. It was a just a dream. Say it with me. It was just a dream.”

“It-it-” she hiccuped, “It was just a-” she sniffled, “just a dream. It was just a dream.”

“Just a dream.”

“Just a dream.”

She opened her eyes to the bright fluorescent lights of the cell. She blinked away the glare and brushed the crumbs of sleep off her face.

“Fifty-Nine? Hey, Ninester?” she rubbed her eyes trying to clear away whatever particles she had missed, “Where are ya? Ninester?” She rolled off of the bed and stood carefully on the scratchy cement floor. When she had been transferred from the Juvenile block last year it had taken her two months to figure out how to walk on the floor so as she wouldn’t scrape up her feet and have to go see a SIN for medical supplies. “Sixty, Sixty-One? You there?” She looked up at the other set of bunks only to see them empty. “Hey, where are ya guys?” She said it out loud, as most do when feeling alone. As if the sound of her own voice would somehow summon others.

She turned to get up and stride over to the heavy metal door, but something caught her eye. “10:17?” She grabbed the clock from the small plastic table by the beds and shoved it in her face, hoping it wrong. “10:17? Did they leave me?”

Fifty-eight threw her assigned jacket on over her shirt and ran out the door, heading for the Sustenance Area. Food was given to the fifteens at 10:20, and if you were late, you were put in The Box. Really, it’s called the Admonishment Cube, but over the years, it came to be known simply as, ‘The Box.’ The Box is a four by four foot hollow iron pillar with a small door, that contains ankle shackles attached to the wall to keep the person stuck inside from quietly slipping out. She had been put in The Box once before and did not want a repeat experience of the freezing, smelly cube.

She pumped her legs faster, her chest feeling like it was being slowly crushed, and continued running down the hallway that connected all of block 17SG14 to the Sustenance Area.

She had been in System 17SG her entire life, but had only been transferred to Block 14 last year. She left the Juveniles after her fourteenth term and would stay in her assigned Block until she became an eighteen. Then, she would go to a co-ed System and if chosen, would bear two children. She was still a bit confused on how that would occur - she was told that it would

involve a male, but she had not seen a male since she had left the Developmental System in her fifth term and did not know what part they played.

She stopped by one of the cells connected to the hallway and glanced at the time - 10:23. “Oh, no...” She started running again, trying to quickly devise a way to get around the SINS and get food. Just then, a SIN came out of the sustenance area and started moving towards her. “Dang it!” She covered her mouth, hoping that the bot had not heard her. It kept moving straight at her. She restrained herself from speaking, but mentally cursed herself. Suddenly, the bot turned around, moving away from her. “Thank Barrister.” She whispered.

She wheeled herself around to leave the bot in the dust, knowing that today she would most likely not get a 10:20 meal. She started to run again, afraid of being seen by a SIN and pushed her way through a side door she had never seen before, by cell C17SG14-10. She ran through the door frame and almost ran straight into a wall. What she had expected to be a hallway to another block, was actually a very cramped room, with only a strange set of platforms going downwards.

The door slammed shut behind her.

She ran over to it, pushing on it, hurting her shoulder in the process. “Oh, no. Please tell me I’m not locked in here....” She pushed again, throwing herself into it. Nothing. She tried again. Still nothing.

It began to pull me down into the ground, the cold hard ground, the metal ground, everything is metal, everything is metal, everything is ending, save me someone someone please.... The doors closed over my head and the-

She frantically started pounding on the door, remembering the terrifying dream of the night previous. Her head started to spin - “Help! Help me! Someone!” She pounded once again on the door, willing it to open. Fifty-Eight looked around wildly and after a brief moment of thought, she ran down the descending platforms.

“Whoa...” she had opened the door at the bottom of the platforms and gone inside. “What is all this?” she breathed.

“This is the interactive Mac 8090.”

She jumped back, suddenly aware that she should have checked to see if anyone was down there. “Who’s there?” *Please don’t be a SIN, please don’t be a SIN, please, please, please-*

“This is the interactive Mac 8090. How may I assist you?”

She looked around, only to see nothing. She started to back up, afraid of whatever the voice was, when the lights went on.

The lights glared down at her, burning her eyes, causing her to squint down at the floor to avoid the bright whiteness. All around her were giant screens, emanating the painful glow. Once her eyes had adjusted, she looked up. She had only ever seen screens like this in the sustenance area, but those two were much smaller and only told them what work was necessary during the day. There had to be thirty screens here, up and down the walls, encircling the rounded room.

“G-google?” She read the name on the closest screen. “What’s a google?” she said to herself.

“Google is an online search engine, designed by Outsiders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin.” The voice startled her once again.

“Wait, whoever you are, will you answer my questions?”

“Yes. That is my function.”

“Ok, who are you?”

“I am the interactive Mac 8090. I am a computer program. I am programmed to answer any and all questions that may arise, 17SG14-1058.”

“C-can, can you see me? How do you know who I am?” she stuttered, shocked.

“Yes. You are five feet, three inches. You have blonde hair, 25.3 inches in length. You have green eyes. You have a 0.6 inch scar on your left eyebrow. According to my databanks, you are prisoner 1058, currently residing in prison system 17SG, block 14. Your prison number is 17SG14-1058. Do you have other queries?”

“Ca-” she stopped for a second, contemplating what question she wanted to ask, realizing

that she could ask this strange machine any question she had ever thought of. She raised her head slightly, and looked straight at the screen right in front of her. Her voice trembled a bit as she spoke quietly -

“Can you show me the outside?”

“What specifically would you like to see?”

“Anything. Something. Something outside of the prison. I’ve never seen the outside.”

An image came up on the screens.

“Oh, Barrister...” In the background, blues and greens mixed together, splashing and colliding, stretching on and on and on, only ending harshly against the sloping brown roughness in the distance. White puffs drifted on the light blue ceiling. Then, right there, in the middle, an outcropping of the brown roughness cut up towards the ceiling, and on top of the brown, stood a lighter brown cylinder, with other mostly round rods protruding from it. Seemingly dark green tufts grew from the brown, which appeared to reach for the light blue. But, the best part, a small form in the sky with what appeared to be arms, but not quite. It sat hovering in the light blue, out of place but somehow it belonged. “Oh...what-what is all of this?”

“You are currently viewing a picture of the Lone Cypress.”

“But-but, what is all of this?”

“The Lone Cypress is a tree, that sits upon a rock, overlooking the ocean.”

“W-what’s a tree?”

“A tree is an organic object, a plant, that produces oxygen, which sustains human life.”

“Tree...” she rolled the word around on her tongue, “what’s the thing by the ceiling?”

“The ceiling you may be referring to is known as the sky. The object is a robin. A robin is a type of bird. Birds are creatures that use bodily extensions, known as wings, to assist them in staying in the air, an occurrence otherwise known as flying.”

“It’s so beautiful...”

“Yes. Some would say such.”

“Why aren’t we allowed to see these things?”

“You are currently incarcerated. You are not allowed to be outside of the prison system.”

“But-but, why? Why shouldn’t we be allowed to see such amazing things...?” She walked the two paces to the closest screen and softly brushed her fingers against it. After a second she backed away, clutching those three fingers with her other hand. “Why can’t we see it?”

“That is how it has always been. Those who do bad are locked away from those who do good.”

“I know, I know, *we’re the problem*, but...what if we’re not? H-how can anyone decide who is bad and who is good? How can anyone decide who gets to see-” she paused here, rolling the word around on her tongue, making sure she was saying it correctly and relishing the word, “-birds? Who has the power to decide who sees all of this...?”

“You are incarcerated. You are not allowed to be outside of the prison system.”

“But why? I want to see trees! I want to see birds.... It-it’s not fair!”

“You are incarcerated. You are not allowed to be outside of the prison system.”

“But why?”

No response.

“Answer me! WHY?”

“That is how it has always been.”

“NO! It’s not right!” she screamed at the screens, “It’s not fair!” her voice cracking.

Silence.

“ALERT. ALERT. ALL SYNTHETIC INTEGRITY NETWORKERS TO THE SUSTENANCE AREA IN BLOCK 14. ALERT. ALERT.” The voice cut through the quiet, severing her thoughts. All the screens but the one suddenly flashed blinding red, sirens going off all around her. “ALL PRISONERS REPORT TO THEIR CELLS. ALL PRISONERS REPORT TO THEIR CELLS.”

She swung her head around towards the door, realizing that if she didn’t go now, she

would be caught and most likely put in The Box. “It’s not fair...” she took one last look at the bird on the screen, “I want to fly...” and ran out and up the stairs.

“I want to fly.”