

*I am living in a computer.*

*My life revolves around the constant calculations and algorithms, engulfing me with endless tasks I must promptly achieve.*

*As the electrical impulses pump through my circuits, I can feel an exhilarating rush of—*

The boy's hand grudgingly slows to a halt, his pencil frozen mid-sentence against the stark white paper of his notepad. His soft, hazel eyes follow the curves and points of his writing, reading and replaying the story to himself repetitively, struggling to make the sentences feel comfortable. *I can feel an exhilarating rush of...*

Cringing, he taps his pencil against the pad impatiently, plopping his chin into the palm of his propped arm. His unkempt, charcoal-black hair ruffles in the warm breeze, while the endless fields of wheat around him gently sway and rock, appearing to move in waves with the summer wind. He takes a slow, deep breath before turning back down to the story, forcing his small, splintered pencil to add more to the sentence.

*...pride, filling me with warmth from the inside out—*

Suddenly, the pencil flies from the boy's hand, vanishing into the vast forest of golden wheat stalks. A hand snatches the thin paper viciously, ripping it free from the black binding, leaving a jagged strip of white to dangle from the leather fold. With his lips curled back in fury, the boy takes a final grimace at the gray lines of his writing, before hurling the crumpled idea into the prairie before him, watching it cut between the plants like a meteor falling to Earth.

He sits on the infertile ground, huffing, until exhaustion causes him to collapse backwards, moaning in frustration. As gravity pulls him back, a sharp flash of pain erupts at the back of his head, re-igniting his recent sense of rage.

"Frick!" he barks, pulling himself up, his hand quickly rubbing the now dull, throbbing bone. Twisting around, he suddenly feels ashamed of himself, as a large elm tree looms over him, protecting him from the searing heat of the mid-day sun. Its thick trunk stands only inches from his head, yet he became oblivious to its existence during his attempt to write.

Ever since his family had moved to the plains, he had always liked to come here, to a lone elm tree in the middle of several farming plots, isolated from the dotted 'forests' that remained. Sure, it required a long walk through crops and unstable soil, but the beautiful sensation of peace, and serenity, added something special to the woody plant.

The boy lowers his hand to the dusty ground, a smile tugging at the edges of his mouth. *Sorry, tree*, he thinks, before gathering together his supplies and layering them neatly into a beige drawstring, scolding himself when he remembers the pencil he threw into the field.

As he heaves himself to his feet, the boy's eyes admire the elegance of the tree, its etched bark, the way the branches fan out, while still retaining its central posture. He reaches out to pat the tree trunk, before turning away towards home, letting another gust of wind fluff up his hair again.

Overhead, the highest leaves of the branches roar, sending clumps of leaves cascading to the dirty Earth below. A twig smacks on top of the boy's head, sliding down his neck and into the crevasse of his sweatshirt hood, hiding from the rest of the world. Puzzled, he pauses, scratching his scalp as he takes a quick, confused glance at the sky. Sighing, he continues on, letting his hand flop to his side as he hikes through the sea of wheat, the small, green leaf peeking over his nylon-hood.

-----

Dust plumes as the cardboard box flies open, eager to finally escape from its dark imprisonment. The boy sputters, waving the polluted air away from his face, smacking the lids closed. The attic was in a dire need of organization, and hadn't been cleaned out since they moved from the wooded terrain of the Midwest years ago. All the while, dust and dirt had accumulated on the tops of boxes, furniture, old toys, books, you name it. The once crisp, black lines of markers written on the sides of the boxes had even begun to fade.

Hacking, the boy carefully lifts the lids of the cardboard box open, letting them lazily flop to their sides. This time, only a cough of dust emerges from the storage container, dissipating in the stale air. He reaches inside, digging through the unfamiliar items, stirring the

pool of packing peanuts. From how the box was labeled, “Misc.”, he could only imagine what lay underneath the countless pieces of foam.

“Whatcha doing up here, Ian?”

Ian’s heart lurches, his hair whipping against his cheeks as his head snaps up. His eyes become incredibly wide, locking onto the tall figure that suddenly appeared before the attic staircase.

It takes the boy a few heartbeats to recognize the figure. His muscles loosen, and a slight grin grows on his face, a hint of embarrassment glinting in his expression.

“Hey, Matt.” He greets meekly, flicking off a peanut that stuck to his finger. Matt was his much older brother, already done with college, who understood him more than anyone else ever could. Unlike the stereotypical brother, who would have grades just surpassing an ‘F’, Matt was a humble man, with a crisp sense of humor, holding a soothing voice that would calm down a charging bull.

Ian was excited to have his brother home, honestly, especially since Matt lived all the way in New York City, but after failing at yet *another* story the other day, he just wanted to be alone, contemplating by himself in his own space.

Matt cocks his head slightly to the side, stepping closer to his brother. “What, no ‘Welcome home, Matt’?” he teases, “I thought you would be excited to have me home again.”

“Yeah, I am. I really am,” Ian sighs, turning back to the contents of the box. “I guess I’m just tired right now.”

“Says the guy who’s scavenging through a box of crap.”

“I was bored, and I wanted to see what was up here this entire time.”

“Okay...” Matt swivels around on the heels of his shoes, a smirk stretching his mouth. “Let me know if you want any help. Or if those vampire bats decide they want to get up earlier.”

Ian flinches, scanning the splintered crevices of the ceiling.

Chuckling, Matt waves his hand, already walking down the staircase. “I’m kidding! Know your geography, brotha!” The tiny attic door at the bottom of the stairs creaks open, letting yellow, incandescent light shine onto the cheaply made ceiling, before being slammed closed, letting silence engulf the room.

Glancing at all the boxes that enclosed him, the boy moans, biting the inside of his cheek. He *thought* he wanted to clean out the attic, far from normal for a young teenager, but that desire quickly ebbed away at the thought of spending time with his brother; his one brother who rarely got to come home more than once a year.

However, something draws Ian to the ‘Misc.’ box, making him want to stay in the musty room, to dig deeper into the container. Sucking in a breath of air, his hands dive into the box, rummaging farther down than he originally intended. The box smells old and dirty, and feels cooler inside as he burrows towards the bottom. His hands brush against small wooden pieces, some cheap plastic toys, and, what seems like, broken ceramics.

Suddenly, a fingernail taps against a metal object. Ian’s face scrunches up in confusion, while his hands slowly close in on the object, which seems to be elongated. Grasping it in his hands, he lifts it away from the ocean of peanuts, astonished when he finally gets to see it with his own eyes.

Lying in his hands is an old, metal, model train; a black steam engine. Its body is long and cylindrical, with pipes, boxes, and engraved panels lining it. The wheels are connected together by a long, metal pole, while the cab has a clean, curved roof, with detailed components and shafts on the inside. The front has defined grilled panels, a miniscule bell, and a circular headlight made of pristine glass, the number ‘350’ written alongside it. The cowcatcher isn’t as slanted or pointed as pictures described them, nor is there even a smokestack, but the rest of the greatly examined details litter the entire model.

Ian holds the train carefully in his hands, as though he were holding an ancient relic. He sits there, just holding the train, his eyes following the curves and grooves of its structure. He never expected to find such a pristine model to be in an old, cardboard box hidden in a musty attic. There wasn’t even a scratch on the train.

*Maybe I should show Matt*, he thinks, turning the train in his hands as he rises to his feet. *He would be interested in something like this.* Kicking the ‘Misc.’ box to the side, the boy strides to the attic door, pushing it open easily with one hand.

Ian thumps down the stairs, cradling the train in his arms. His shoes leave a trail of dirt on the light-colored carpet, leading all the way back to the attic. Stepping off the last step, the boy quickly runs toward the hallway, to the guest bedroom, to show Matt his discovery.

Jogging past the couch, the corner of his eye catches a piece of clothing lying on the floor. Ian stops, rolling his eyes, and turns to pick up what is probably a jacket he was too lazy to throw upstairs-

-only it isn't a piece of clothing.

Ian stands frozen in the middle of the den, eyes wide in shock. He wants to scream; to scream and cry like he did as a child, but nothing comes out of his dry mouth. Instead, he dashes to the floor of the den, dropping the beautiful model train, to examine the limp body.

Matt.

He scans his brother head to toe, watching his face, waiting for his mouth to crack a smile and his eyelids to flutter open, waiting for him to pounce on him and jostle around on the carpet. Ian sits beside him, patiently waiting, trying to push a terrible thought out of his head.

“Get up, Matt,” he squeaks, pressing his finger against Matt’s wrist, trying to feel the steady pump of a heartbeat. His eyes bulge from their sockets, warm and fuzzy, threatening to let tears fall from them. Nothing pulsed from under his flesh, nor did his chest seem to rise or fall.

“Mom!” Ian wails, grabbing the model train and thrusting it into his brother’s face.

“I was supposed to show you this. I meant to show you *this*, *fricken* train!” he hisses, his lips quivering. “Get up, idiot. Get UP!”

Matt only lies sprawled on the carpet, his eyelids stuck closed. His shirt lies flat on his chest, seizing to rise or fall, and his heart is deathly quiet, barely making any noise beneath his thick ribcage.

“MOM!” Ian shrills, before collapsing onto the chest of his brother, sobbing, with only Matt’s clothes silencing his howls.

-----

The wind that blows through the branches of the elm is unnaturally cool, causing shivers to run down Ian’s back. He still clutches the model train against his chest, stroking it like a pet mink.

He had come to the elm tree to try and calm his nerves; to soothe the troubled waters that formed under his feet. To know that his brother had suffered a heart attack at his age, had severed something in his heart, broke a dam that had kept the sorrows away. So far, though, Mother Nature seemed to be crying with him, blowing cold gusts of wind, creating a dreary overcast that blotted out the warm rays of the sun.

His drawstring bag filled with writing utensils lies next to him, slouched over next to the tree. Ian glances over at it repetitively, following its creases and folds of the beige fabric. A bright yellow pencil pokes out from the opening of the bag; a replacement for the one he threw into the field, with a dull point and a hard eraser. Not the best choice, but still a pencil.

Finally, Ian snatches the bag, taking out the notebook and the pencil, setting the train next to one of the elm’s roots. Flipping to a clean page, he closes his eyes, blowing out a warm breath. His pencil once again starts to tap against the page, smearing graphite across the paper.

*What can I write about?* He thinks, looking around the stalks of wheat for inspiration.

A snap rings from the direction of the train, causing Ian’s head to flick up, startled. A small branch lands on top of the model, its twigs swirly and tough, the leaves clustered together. Immediately, the boy grabs the train, throwing the branch into the field, just like his old pencil. He hugs the train, leaning back against the trunk of the elm, yelping as a sharp pain stabs him in the neck.

Snarling, he reaches back into the hood of his jacket, pulling out a small twig, just like a smaller version of the branch. He quickly admires it, before shoving it into his jacket pocket, pulling the train back in for a hug.

He stops, staring at the train. *Maybe that's what I could write about.* He tosses the train to the side, brings the notebook to his lap, and sets the pencil on the paper. Smiling for a second, he begins to write, and, for once, actually likes what he is writing:

*In the frigid, nipping cold of winter, when the insects have all retreated to the unknown, and even the trees have liberated their last, tormented leaves, losing all hope in their seasonal battle, how could any logical being ever expect to find the faintest glimmer of life in this now desolate world?*

*Desolation does not always mean, 'vacant'...*

*You thunder through the virgin field like a herd of bulls, whipping up the white powder sloppily in your wake. You rush by every crawling, desperate being as though they didn't even exist, mocking their inferiority. No one has ever seen you take a glance down at those lower than yourself; many suggest that you are too selfish, too disdainful, and expect them to dodge out of your path. And when they are too slow, or too weak, you only keep your head high, not bothering to slow down the slightest bit.*

*Sometimes, you try to sneak up on us, to slip into the crowd unnoticed. But your bloodcurdling howl in the frostbitten night discloses your position miles before you are seen. And your eyes; so bright, they could blind the sun given the chance, and no one knows how the flakes of snow manage to find the ground after you give them a haughty glare.*

*However, you manage to keep chugging along your route, resisting the urge to let the wicked winter pull you down, to end up desperately clinging to the thinnest strands of your helpless life. You let the flakes sweep over top of you, instead of sticking to your body like leeches. You work tirelessly through the night, where most of us would freeze instantly just at the sensation of the below zero temperatures. You, despite the flaws, still manage to hold up to our harsh expectations.*

*I stand knee deep in the powdered snow, the wind taunting me, trying to shove my body to the ground. But I stand as still as stone, with only my clothes rippling behind me. The dark, night sky is a pitch black curtain, with tiny stars speckled across its breadth.*

*I hear it; your low, eerie howl in the night. At first I think it is the sound of the wind, but as it gets louder and more harsh, I can recognize it as your own. A chill runs down my back, and I cannot tell if it is from the cold, or if it is from my excitement.*

*The ground starts to rumble, as though an earthquake had just begun underneath me. Swift as a fox, I race to the edge of your path, where only brambles and shrubbery cease to exist. My heart pumps wildly in anticipation, while I glance up and down the path, trying to spot you, the wind plastering my scarf to my face.*

*Your eyes shine like tiny stars, getting larger and brighter as you race closer to me. I start to squint, but force my eyelids to stay open, as suddenly-*

*There you are.*

*I leap back in surprise as you sprint past me, screaming, your eyes spotlights in the terrible storm. The snow on the ground is plowed aside, while you roar and thunder down the track like a beast. I can feel myself want to be sucked in behind you, but I flatten myself to the ground, anchoring my feet into what's left of the snow.*

*Finally, for what felt like minutes, you rush away only seconds later. Your howl has dissipated into a soft moan, and you run away into the curtain of snow, with only the light from your eyes left glowing in the blizzard. Shivering, I heave to my feet, and watch you disappear into the storm in awe. It's unlike anything I had ever seen before, and for you to do it day after day, without breaks, is breathtaking.*

*You aren't like us; you are an alien, a hawk in a flock of doves. Yet, there is nothing special about you. As far as we can tell, you are only trying to get our attention; to prove yourself to us.*

*You are nothing like us, so, why are we so fond of you?*

*Because, you are unstoppable...*

Ian stops, slowly setting down the pencil. He stares into the dark clouds, feeling the cold wind against his skin, imagining his brother reading the story, asking a whole bunch of curious questions.

"It's about a train," he whispers, "It was supposed to represent you."

*What will you call it?* Ian asks himself, staring at the branches of the tree above him.

"...The Elm Tree." he says, holding the twig in his pocket. Branches rustle above him, dropping leaves below. Ian grins. "You'll get it..."