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DEPTHS OF PERCEPTION

A Thesis
Presented to
The Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Connor Matthews
May 2024

Accepted by:
Nic Brown, Committee Chair
Keith Morris
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ABSTRACT

This thesis contains the first four chapters of a novel named *Depths of Perception* (working title), as well as a short critical essay detailing the process of creating the chapters as well as other literary influences that impacted the construction of the work. The focus of this thesis is on the use of shifting point of view to tell a story from a multitude of character's perspectives. While this is not a new concept, I aim to derive a deeper understanding of the importance of being able to access the perspectives of a large cast of characters. Allowing the reader the freedom to know more about the story's characters by making all of their thoughts known, while also constraining the reader by taking away access to certain points of view at times, helps to create a layer of tension not only within the story, but also for the reader.

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Chapter 1 - (Nora)

It had been two whole weeks of non-stop disappointment. The flea markets were a bust, the Salvation Army was fruitless, and of course the local grocery stores had nothing that fit the bill. Nora needed to find the perfect gift for her brother Joey's birthday. Failing to do so would be an outcome worse than the most painful death imaginable. Well, maybe not worse than the most painful death, but definitely worse than a relatively painful death.

Nora prided herself in her ability to be the ultimate gift-giver on every occasion. Whether it be birthdays, Christmas, or even that one Labor Day when she decided to buy all of her friends a gift to celebrate, she never failed to impress. Her philanthropic nature was what she considered to be one of her most endearing qualities, although, at times like these, maintaining her self-imposed status quo was far from easy.

The year prior, she had bought Joey a brand new 4K resolution camcorder. Of course he loved it. He had just gotten into making little online videos of himself going out and exploring abandoned places, so she knew that one would be a hit. The only difficult part about it was that it needed to be a respectably expensive one since it was for his eighteenth birthday. Nineteen, on the other hand, didn't warrant such financial investment. The type of gift you give someone on

their nineteenth birthday should be judged solely on the thought and care put into it. At least, that's the way Nora saw it.

“I think I see one up ahead!” said Iris Madison Huxley, breaking Nora out of her line of thought. “Should we pull in?”

Iris had been Nora's best friend and part time chauffeur for as long as she could remember, and yes, she always referred to herself as Iris Madison. Despite this self-imposed branding, Nora refused to ever call her that. It felt a little too self righteous to actually use your own middle name like that in casual conversation. You would never catch her going around calling herself “Nora Gertrude,” but then again, Madison does have a nicer ring to it than Gertrude.

“Obviously we should pull in,” Nora replied. “This is only the second one we've seen all day.”

Nora had become a bit desperate. Joey's birthday was now only a few days away, and she had resorted to driving around with her friend on a Saturday morning looking for the perfect gift at yard sales. Unfortunately, living in South Dakota meant that there were slim pickings in terms of people setting up shop trying to get rid of their junk. Heading south of her hometown was a desperate attempt to hopefully find a hidden gem out in the middle of nowhere. Unfortunately for her, that gem had to be extremely well hidden. If only she had thought to buy the gift a month in advance while she was still at school before the summer. Her chances of finding something in Michigan would have been much higher than they were here.

“What if this one is worse than the last one?” Iris asked. “I didn't think people sold underwear at yard sales, and they were so big too! I really thought it was a flag.”

“That’s why you don’t just pick up things and start playing with them. Just use your eyes this time and tell me if you see something Joey might like.”

“What are we even really looking for?”

“I already told you: weird shit, outdoorsy shit, or generally cool shit.”

“Yeah but that feels really broad, and should I be looking in that order? Like, do I prioritize weird over outdoorsy or is it the other way around?”

“Look, Iris, you’re overthinking things. When the right stuff pops up, we’ll know.” Nora paused for a moment and looked at Iris’ hopeful, yet almost thoughtless face. “Or at least I will, and you can get credit for driving me around.”

“Yay!” Iris said, apparently genuinely excited by the prospect of getting a tiny bit of credit.

Iris pulled into the dirt driveway of a small one-story home. It looked exactly like the handful of other ones they had passed while driving: aggressively quaint. There were more hay bales in sight than there were trees, and there certainly were more trees than there were people; a ratio that had held true all day long. A small sign wedged into the ground read: “YARD SALE: TODAY UNTIL 2.” The writing was crudely etched into the sign with what appeared to be a black crayon. It looked like a kid had drawn it.

There were piles of random trinkets and clothes laid out on a handful of folding tables. Nora spotted what looked to be old board games and children's toys among the jumbled mess of items. Sitting behind one of the tables was an old woman with a perm, wearing a floral pattern shirt. There were no other potential customers, and given what Nora could make of the selection from afar, the lack of people was probably not due solely to the small population of the area. Nevertheless, she got out of Iris’ car and approached the stacks of geriatric goods.

“Hi there, sweetie, I think I already know what you want,” the woman said as Nora drew close to her. She had a noticeable country drawl. “You would look absolutely gorgeous in this dress.”

The woman held up a gray and green dress that looked like it hadn't been worn since the thirties, and it smelled like it too. Old scent is what Nora called it. It smelled a bit like her grandmother's couch. Even if Nora felt like smelling senile, she did not want to look like a housewife during the Roosevelt administration; plus, it also looked at least six sizes too small. Even Iris probably couldn't even fit into it, and she had one of the tiniest figures Nora thought to be humanly possible.

“I love antiques,” Iris said, running over after locking her car. She began to inspect the dress closely. “It could use a bit more color, though.”

“You're one of those sparkly girls aren't you?” the woman said to Iris with a smile. “I can tell by your car.” She pointed to Iris' hot pink Volkswagen Beetle. Nora used to feel embarrassed riding around in it, but after years of being a passenger in the “pink machine,” she had almost completely dissociated it with being a peculiarity on the road. “Maybe you would like this one a bit more.” The woman reached her hand into the pile of clothes and pulled out a sequin-covered dress with frilly ends at the bottom. It looked like it could have been a genuine flapper dress from over a hundred years ago. It was pretty, but more so in a way that you would think of a grandma being pretty back in her heyday rather than something Nora thought Iris would wear.

“It's so pretty,” Iris said. “Did you used to wear this to the speakeasy?” Nora wasn't sure if she was more surprised that Iris knew what a speakeasy was, or by the fact that she had actually said that. Either way, the lady definitely was not alive during the Great Depression.

Nora's face had an "I want to die" look written all over it, but this was far from the first time Iris' lack of social courtesy had caused such a facial contortion.

"It wasn't mine," the woman said, unphased by Iris' comment. "It was my mother's. She was a dancer! I remember one time when I was just a little—" Nora felt a long winded story coming on. As much as she would have loved to let the lady reminisce, time was not something she was willing to spend so easily. Joey's birthday was fast approaching, meaning this trip needed to yield some results.

"It *is* such a beautiful dress!" Nora interrupted with as much faux enthusiasm as she could muster. "How much for it?"

"How does twenty dollars sound?" the woman asked, seemingly unsure about the value.

"Only twenty!" Iris said. "This has to be worth so much more than twenty dollars."

"Here, take twenty five," Nora said, pulling the cash out of her purse. The dress was probably worth way more than that, but Nora was not about to spend more money than she had to on a purchase to avoid an epic countenance of an elderly woman's youth. Plus, she had gotten a nice tax return a few months ago, so what was the harm in throwing away a few dollars for the sake of convenience?

"I think it's probably worth—" Iris was cut off by Nora pinching her arm. "Ow! Why'd you do that?" The woman took the money from Nora and handed her the dress.

"Here, go put it in the car," Nora said to Iris. Seemingly already forgetting about Nora's pinch, Iris happily skipped back to the car to put away her new little piece of history. "Thank you," Nora said to the woman, "but, we're actually here looking to get my brother something. The clothes are great, but I don't think that's really what he'd like to get as a present. Do you think you might have something a little less... fabric-y?"

“I have a little bit of something for everyone,” the woman said with a wink.

“Ooo even for people who like outdoorsy and weird and cool things?” Iris said, as she excitedly skipped her way back into the conversation.

“Of course, dear,” the woman responded, “in fact, my husband was the coolest and weirdest person I ever knew.” A glimmer of hope was ignited in Nora when she heard this. If this woman had some antique stuff that wasn’t just some dollar store garbage, maybe this trip would actually be worthwhile. “I don’t bring his things out here, though. It makes me sad if I look at them too long.”

“Oh no,” Iris said, “rest in peace. I’m sure he was really cool.”

“You bet he was, sweetie. One time, when we were in high school—”

“You should tell us all about him while we go find his stuff,” Nora said, cutting the woman off once again. “I’m sure there are a million stories you could tell us *while we look*.”

“What a lovely idea. I think it will be easier to do this with some company. I normally wouldn’t think to sell his things, but I think it’s time to try and let go of a few knickknacks.” The woman stood up and walked to her front door, Nora and Iris following suit.

“By the way, what’s your name?” Nora asked the woman. “I’m Nora and this is Iris—”

“It’s actually Iris Madison,” Iris said, sticking her hand out to the woman for a handshake.

“You can just call me Gran Gran, it’s what all the children call me,” Gran Gran said, taking Iris’ outstretched hand.

“Cute!” Iris said, “Do your grandkids visit often?”

“More often than you would think. I never feel lonely even though I’m way out here away from the cities. Where are you girls from? I know it can’t be close or else we would already be good friends.” Gran Gran chuckled a little at her own remark.

“We live in Rapid City,” Nora responded. “At least that’s where our families live. We’re both home from college for the summer.”

“Big city girls, huh. That life just wouldn’t work for me,” Gran Gran said. Rapid Falls definitely was a big city by South Dakota standards, but it was more so a moderately sized city by most people’s standards. “Well, I hope you ladies don’t mind my small way of life too much.”

“Not at all, I think it’s very rustic-posh,” Iris said. “That’s a new subgenre of the country-core living that I saw on Pinterest.”

Gran Gran smiled at Iris’ compliment. Nora, on the other hand, had no idea what the compliment even meant.

Gran Gran walked the girls to her front door and ushered them into her home. Upon her first look inside, Nora’s eyes were ambushed by a visual assault of paraphernalia. Nora had never experienced hoarding first-hand, but this had to count as a pretty hardcore case. Gran Gran stepped inside first, following a narrow path that had been cut through the piles of things. It was hard to make out what exactly the piles of things were made of. There were definitely a lot of clothes, some childrens toys here and there, random tools and electronics that looked to be from the 90’s or earlier. Thankfully, there didn’t seem to be any food laying around.

“What are you two waiting for?” Gran Gran asked the girls still standing outside. “We have some searching to do.”

“Nora,” Iris whispered, “I don’t think I want to be here anymore.”

“You can stay out here if you want, but I’m going to at least take a quick look around. Maybe that perfect gift is hiding here like buried treasure.”

“Do you really want to give your brother something from a hoarder lady’s house? That feels a little – how do I put it?”

“Wrong? Stupid?”

“You said it, not me.”

“Look, the effort of going through whatever this is, just adds to the level of thought put into the gift.”

“What are you two talking about?” Gran Gran said as she shuffled further into the house, almost tripping over a pile of clothes in the hallway. “My hearing isn’t quite as good as it used to be. You’ll have to speak up a bit.”

“I’m going. Come with or stay. It’s up to you,” Nora said as she ventured into the clutter.

“Fine,” Iris groaned, “but I’ll be really mad at you if I get a disease or something from this.”

“I’m sorry about the mess. I usually do my cleaning on Sundays, so you caught me on my worst day,” Gran Gran said. The thought of even attempting to clean any of this mess gave Nora a headache. “Over to the right is the kitchen. That’s where me and Herold had our pancakes and Diet Seven Up every morning.” The odd habits of old people never ceased to amaze and concern Nora.

“I like the green tiles on the wall. It feels very seventies,” Nora said, unsure of how to respond to Gran Gran.

“They used to be blue. I think the lighting makes the color look a bit off.”

The lighting was absolutely horrid, but if Nora were to take a guess, the discoloration was probably more likely due to years of grime building up on it. The stove also looked straight out of the seventies with its light green hue and rusted metal knobs. The small table in the center of the room had a hefty pile of pots, pans, and other assorted kitchen utensils, making it look as

though no meals had been eaten there in some time. At least the cat-shaped wall clock was still moving its tail back and forth with every passing second.

“And over here is the television room,” Gran Gran said as she pulled open a door about a quarter of the way. At first, Nora thought that she was just cracking the door for them to peek inside, but it was just as far as the door would open without getting stuck on a pile of clothes that were blocking its full range of motion. “Herold and I used to watch Jeopardy every night here. He had such a big brain. They never could have let him on the show because he never would have lost.” Similar to the kitchen, the television room was a few decades behind in terms of decoration. Nora had never actually seen a TV with antennas before.

“Sounds like he was a really fun guy,” Nora said, once again trying her hardest to find something nice to say. She was hoping this house tour wasn’t going to take the rest of the day, but at the rate they were going, it seemed like it might. “What kinds of things did he collect?”

“Oh, that's right,” Gran Gran said. “We’re looking for Herold’s things. I keep it all in the back room. Some of his things are a little old fashioned, but that’s a good thing if you ask me.” She seemed excited as she proceeded further down the cluttered hallway. They passed a few more ajar doors as they walked, revealing more rooms in disarray. “And that door there leads to the little ones’ playroom.” She pointed to a door with flaking pink paint decorated with crudely placed stickers of kids’ T.V. show characters. “No need to go in there, though. They don’t do too well with strangers.”

Iris gave Nora a puzzled look after Gran Gran’s comment. Nora just shrugged, unaware what to make of it as well. Were her grandkids there right now? That seemed like some sort of child endangerment case waiting to happen.

Nora was just going to let it go, but Iris asked the question they were both thinking aloud: “You have kids in here?” Her delivery lacked any sort of tact. Her concern for the old lady’s living situation was blatant.

“Of course,” Gran Gran said. She seemed almost confused by the question. “Didn’t I tell you they stay here all the time?” Nora didn’t recall that exact wording. Regardless, now she had to deal with the guilt of knowing that there were kids living in conditions like this. Was this something she needed to call CPS about? Why did life have to be so hard? What were she and Iris going to have for dinner? Nora’s mind filled with a storm of existential questions until she was brought back to her present situation by Gran Gran’s voice. “Here we are.” She was standing in front of a slender door. It looked like it was probably a small closet. She opened the door, revealing a fittingly closet-sized space, but there didn’t appear to be anything inside of it, a stark contrast to every other room so far.

“Are you sure?” Nora asked. “It looks a little bit empty.”

“That’s because you have to go further inside,” Gran Gran said as she stepped into the closet. She reached for a dangling string and pulled it, turning on what must have been an extremely low wattage light bulb. The dim lighting revealed the room to be as small as it initially seemed to be. Gran Gran put her hand on one of the corners of the back wall and began to pull. “This thing can be so difficult sometimes.” She continued to pull until the wall itself peeled back, revealing a narrow corridor, the end of which was completely dark. “It never gets any easier.”

“You keep his stuff behind a fake wall?” Nora asked, both amazed and concerned. Her brother would have loved exploring this place. Nora, on the other hand, could have gone without the additional challenges that apparently have to come with looking for a dead old man’s belongings.

“Was he a drug lord or something?” Iris asked. She seemed more excited than Nora would have thought. “This is like a movie. I wonder if there’s, like, a million dollars back there.”

Gran Gran laughed. “Nothing that exciting. Just some odds and ends.”

“Seriously though, why the hidden passage?” Nora asked.

“My husband was an architect, darling. He designed this little passageway to go to his study just because it sounded like a fun idea. Now it’s just a storage room. To be truthful, I keep his belongings back here for my own sake. I’ve been told that I get too attached to things, and I just can’t help myself when I see something that was Harold’s. ”

“What do you mean?” Nora asked.

“I’ll cry and hold onto it. I used to sleep with his clothes instead of blankets, but I haven’t done that for a while now. I’ve had some other impulses with his things, but I’m much better now.”

Nora was thankful that she was spared the details of whatever Gran Gran’s other impulses might have been. “I’m sorry to hear that,” she said. “Are you sure we can look through his things?”

“I’m sure. I invited you in to help you and myself. It’s far past time for me to let go of some things.”

“That’s so brave of you, Gran Gran,” Iris said. “So, we just have to squeeze through there?”

“Yes, the lightswitch is on the left once you get through the tight bit.” Gran Gran turned to Nora and flashed a smile. “Your friend might have to give *you* a little push.” It was hard to tell if that was a compliment or an insult to Nora’s figure. Regardless of Gran Gran’s old-timey body ideals, it did look like it would be a tight squeeze for her, maybe too tight.

“I’ll go first, Nora,” Iris said. “I’m your scout.”

“Sure,” Nora said. Iris’ constant willingness to look helpful was cute despite how minor it tended to be.

Iris raised her hands above her head and began stretching as if she were warming up for a race. “Okay, here I go,” she said, beginning to shimmy through what couldn’t have been much more than a foot wide gap.

Nora started her preparation for venturing in after Iris. She turned sideways, putting as much of her body into the crevice as she could. She used the force of her other planted foot outside of the passageway to attempt to force herself deeper in. She was able to get an inch further into the passageway, if that. Maybe Gran Gran was right about Iris pushing her.

After a few moments of failing to stuff herself into the claustrophobic path, she decided brute force wasn’t going to work. Nora looked to Iris who had been waiting for her a few feet forward. “I don’t think I’m going to fit,” she said. To come this far into a weird old lady’s house and be unable to reach the proverbial buried treasure was more frustrating than Nora thought it would be. “Can you look through all the stuff for me?” she asked Iris, disappointed that she wouldn’t be involved in the actual process of gift searching.

“Yes ma’am!” Iris said, throwing up a salute as best she could in the confined space. “Outdoorsy, weird, cool. Outdoorsy, weird, cool,” Iris began to say quietly to herself.

“You two girlies have fun now,” Gran Gran said as Nora watched Iris continue further in. “I’m going to step back outside to keep an eye out for any customers. Just holler if you need anything. Oh, and there’s some lemonade in the fridge.” With that, Gran Gran gave Nora a wave and ventured back through her disaster of a house.

“Old people are so weird,” Nora said once Gran Gran was comfortably out of hearing range, which seemed to be a fairly small range anyway.

“She’s adorable,” Iris said, steadily proceeding forward. “She’s like Betty White,”

“Old?”

“Yep.” It was hard to argue with that.

“How much further is it?” Nora asked Iris after a few moments passed.

“I’m almost there, I can sort of see some stuff,” Iris said.

“What kind of stuff?”

“I think it’s bedsheets, but I’m not sure. I’ll have to turn the light on first.” It was getting hard to tell what Iris was doing from Nora’s limited view, but she could tell that she was finally free from the narrowness of the corridor.

“It is really dark in there, huh,” Nora said to a now out-of-view Iris. “She said the lightswitch was on the left.”

“I don’t see it.”

“That’s probably because it’s dark in there, Iris. You have to turn the light on to be able to see. Use your hands and feel for it.”

“I know that! It’s harder to find than you would think.” There was a moment of silence as Iris presumably continued to search for the light. “I have twenty-twenty vision by the way.”

Nora checked the time on her phone and saw that it was 2:55 in the afternoon. They were near Edgemont, which meant It would take them almost an hour and a half to get back home, and that was assuming she could convince Iris to drive even a little bit over the speed limit. Not enough time to keep driving mindlessly in one direction. This house was going to be their last

hope for the day to find Joey's birthday present. "I'm sure you have great vision, but why don't you try using the flashlight on your phone to find it," Nora said to the struggling Iris.

In a moment, a beam of light pierced through the narrow corridor, hitting Nora right in the eyes. "Hi, Nora!" Iris said giddily. "I can see you again."

"You're supposed to look for the lightswitch, not me," Nora said with closed eyes.

"Oopsie," Iris said. She turned her light from Nora back into the room. After a few moments, a proud "ah-ha" resounded from the room. "Why is it so high up though?" Iris said. "That's like six feet off the ground." The sound of Iris jumping and failing to reach the light switch passed through the corridor that separated the two girls. "Almost... got it!"

Nora heard the flip of a switch, and the room that had just been a black void was now fully visible. It was just like Iris had said. All Nora could make out were some bed sheets that looked like they were covering a plethora of items scattered around the room.

"Are you ready for the big reveal?" Iris asked while doing a drumroll on her legs. She walked over to one of the large items first.

"My excitement is immeasurable," Nora said with a very measurable amount of excitement.

"Here we go! It's a—" Iris ripped the sheet of one of the mystery items in dramatic fashion. "Treadmill!"

"How did she even get a treadmill back there?" Nora asked. "Is there a door somewhere we could have just used?"

"Oh, look," Iris said, "there is a door in here. I couldn't see it before."

"Well, open it and see if I can get in there somehow."

"Yes ma'am!"

“You can stop saying that now.”

Iris walked out of Nora’s line of sight. She could hear the jiggling of a doorknob as Iris tried to get the door open. “It’s a little difficult,” Iris said, grunting as her attempt to open the door became more and more audible.

“It’s fine if it won’t open. You can just keep showing me the stuff.”

“I think I’ve got it, though,” Iris said, clearly dead set on finishing what she started. The door was beginning to creak. Maybe she actually could get it open. “Oh yeah, I can feel it opening up now.”

“Good job. Just see what’s on the other side and–” Nora was cut off by a loud snapping sound followed by a scream from Iris. “What’s wrong?” Nora didn’t need to wait for an answer as she saw Iris fall backwards, followed by a stream of random junk. Clothes, toys, framed pictures, it all blended together into one avalanche of stuff. The room that was once relatively empty compared to the rest of the house was now a mess.

“I’m okay. I’m okay. I’m okay,” Iris said over and over, despite not sounding very okay at all. She was lying down, half covered by the newly spewed junk.

“What happened?” Nora asked.

“I got it to open, but then everything just came out.”

“It must have been really packed tight with all that stuff then. You can come back out if you need a minute. I’m sure that was terrifying.”

“Quite, I’m on a mission though. Your scout will not let you down.” She really was doing her best. Nora started to feel like she needed to pay Iris for gas money *and* a service fee. “Now, where were we?” Iris said, returning to the covered items. As she crossed the room, a noticeable creak resounded with every step she took. “That’s funny. It’s like the floor is sad.”

“I think that’s a bad thing, Iris. Maybe you should just come out anyway.”

“It’ll be okay, I’ll be quick.” Iris quickened her pace into an energetic skip, and the creaking intensified.

“Don’t go faster!” Nora said, genuinely concerned.

“It’s fine, there’s no way that I—” In an instant, Iris disappeared from Nora’s vision. Nora couldn’t even hear her own words over the sound of splintering wood and tumbling piles of Gran Gran’s belongings. Everything that had piled into the room from before was now tumbling downward as a gaping hole in the floor swallowed its overbearing weight. Nora was so fixated on trying to call out to Iris that she didn’t even notice how rapidly the hole was expanding. Within seconds, the entire floor of the hidden room was completely gone.

The destruction did not stop there though, the structural integrity of the walls must have been pushed to their limits as they caved in and joined the freefall. This included the walls of the corridor that had been separating Nora from Iris. The ground beneath Nora’s feet began to shake as well, and within an instant, she became a part of the rain of debris.

Chapter 2 - (Joey)

The schoolhouse looked exactly like it did in the pictures Joey had seen online: small, brick, and, above all, boring. That was okay though; nothing a little theatrics and ambient lighting couldn't fix. That was why they decided to get there just before sundown after all.

Joey took in the surrounding area: flat grassland with nothing other than a treeline in the far distance to break up the monotonous repetition of visual simplicity. He turned to speak to Alex, his childhood friend and dedicated cameraman.

"I think we should shoot the exterior before it gets dark," he said. "Maybe do a little transition type thing where we swap it over to night footage." The creative juices were starting to flow freely. He had done more with less in the past. "Then I can do a voiceover once we show the night time footage and I'll be all like, 'Are the children's tortured souls still trapped in this prison of knowledge?' How's that sound?"

"So we're going with a haunted story again?" Alex asked, clearly skeptical of the idea. "If you think that's what we should do, then fine."

"Look, buddy, we don't have much to go on here," Joey said, unappreciative of his friend's lack of confidence. "It's an abandoned building that probably no more than ten people in the entire world have ever heard of. We literally only got a paragraph of info about it from the Wikipedia page." Joey didn't want to just completely make up a story for the old building that they had found themselves in front of, but the audience for haunted location exploration far outweighed the audience for regular location exploration. "We have to work with what we've got while we're home for the summer. Consider it filler content to keep the people happy."

“Fine by me. I just hope you can make it sound believable. If people find out that you’re faking shit, they’ll just move on to one of the thousands of other people who do this.”

“You *know* I can make it believable. Did you forget that I played Hamlet in the senior play?”

“I wish I could forget.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, nothing.” Alex turned his head away and muttered under his breath, “very masculine of you.”

“You really wanna go there? I seem to remember a certain someone being in marching band in highschool. And that certain someone also happened to play the clarinet. I mean, seriously, didn’t your parents at least try to talk you out of that? I’m sure at least ninety percent of the chicks that talked to you in school thought you were gay.”

“I was a good ass clarinetist. First chair, even.”

“That is not helping your case.”

“Whatever. Let’s just go check the inside out already, Hamlet.”

“Brilliant idea, Squidward.” Joey felt really good about that last comment. He definitely won that argument, but then again, when did he ever lose an argument?

The pair approached the entrance to the old school. The article they had read about it said that it closed down in the fifties. Joey started to think about something that he could relate to that decade for the sake of his ghost story narrative. Was the Cuban Missile Crisis back then? Maybe the kids got kidnapped by Castro? No, that was too stupid. Best to keep it simple. The kids were murdered, and vengeful spirits decided to hang out at the shitty school in the middle of nowhere. That makes a ton of sense.

The sign above the entrance read: Peterson Schoolhouse. The letters were terribly faded and it looked like the sign could fall at a moment's notice. Most of the windows were shattered, probably for quite some time. Dirt had filled window sills and small plants were beginning to sprout as a result. The scene felt post-apocalyptic, but in an oddly peaceful way.

Joey opened the doors to reveal a simple, single room. That was fitting given the mundane appearance of the building's exterior. The water damage from the lack of windows was the first thing Joey noticed. His first step inside was accompanied by the splashing of about an inch of water. Despite the overall dampness of the room, there were still some interesting things left intact. All of the desks were bolted to the floor. If they hadn't been, someone probably would have stolen them by now. They were pretty cool as far as old school seating arrangements go. The back of each chair had a desk attached to it for the student who sat behind to use.

"Look, there's still some books," Alex said, picking up a soggy binding of papers from the ground. "I think it's a history book. Hard to tell, though."

"That's good. Go ahead and get some shots of everything as is," Joey said, hoping that they might find something a little more interesting to use for the video's thumbnail.

"Got it," Alex said, pulling the camera out of Joey's bag.

With how much Alex used that camera, Joey might as well have given it to him to keep, but that would have felt wrong considering how happy his sister was to give it to him. She was really weird about stuff like that; overly sentimental and overly obsessed with making sure she took care of everyone around her.

Joey continued to look through the small building. The chalkboard at the front of the room was sort of cool, but nothing that anyone would find mindblowing. There were some crude drawings of the phallic variety on the board, obviously done by people who had been there after

the building was abandoned. It looked like it would be a bit of a stretch to sell this as a place worth watching a ten minute video about. Of course, he could make the video a little bit shorter, but then the ad revenue would take a huge hit. Plus, he had already agreed to do a thirty second ad for some shitty phone game at the beginning of the video. It was far below his standards to upload a shortened video that was ten percent corporate shilling. Five percent was as far as he was willing to go.

“This is depressing,” Joey said, taking a seat in one of the old desks. It was surprisingly comfortable. “Let’s shoot an intro out front before it gets dark.”

“You don’t want the intro to be dark and spooky?” Alex asked, almost mockingly.
“Wouldn’t daylight ruin the immersion?”

“We can do another one when it gets dark. Better to have more options for editing.”

“I think you’re just in denial about this place being a bust.”

“Every building has a story.”

“Not every story is interesting.”

“True, but some people like uninteresting stories. Think of *Moby Dick*.”

“You’ve never read *Moby Dick*, have you?”

“Nope, but it sure sounds like it would be boring,” Joey wasn’t really sure where he was going with his analogy anymore. “It doesn’t even matter though because we are going to make these seem like the coolest place ever.”

“Alright then. Improv?”

“You know me so well.” Joey took a few deep breaths and positioned himself underneath the school’s sign. Alex held the camera up and counted down from three on his fingers. After reaching one, he pointed to Joey, and it was time for the show to begin. “What’s going on, Joe

Bros? Today, we are in rural South Dakota, my home state, for an extra special video. This is *the* Peterson Schoolhouse.” Joey motioned to the unimpressive building behind him, and Alex moved the camera to focus on the school. “This seemingly innocent place is actually home to an unimaginable tragedy, and today we are—” Joey’s performance was interrupted by the sound of seven loud *dings* in quick succession.

“Seriously, dude,” Alex said as he lowered the camera.

“Sorry, I didn’t think I would even have service out here,” Joey said, pulling his phone out of his pocket. “It’s Iris.” He had told her that he would be filming today. It was just like her to completely neglect his indirect request for no contact.

“Wait, you guys are talking?”

“Kind of. Sort of. Maybe.” Joey wasn’t sure which non-answer sounded the best, so he just said them all.

“I’m sure Nora loves that.”

“She doesn’t know. Not that there’s anything to know. We just text... every day.”

“Yeah, that’s not indicative of anything at all,” Alex said, slyly.

“I’m glad you agree.”

“Well, what was so important that she had to text you that many times about?”

Joey pulled out his phone and opened the messages. “It looks like she sent some of these a while ago. They must have just now gone through.” Joey scrolled through the messages.

“Looks like she and Nora went somewhere. Oh look, she sent a picture.” Joey held up the phone to Alex so he could see the picture of an old timey dress being held up in front of a small house.

It was sent with a message that read: ‘look what Nora bought me <3.’

“Wow that dress looks old as hell,” Alex said. “Where are they?”

“She said they were going to a secret place to find something secret,” Joey said, reading off one of the earlier texts.

“Wow, I wonder what that could be about?” Alex asked, sarcastically. “Maybe they’re getting you a dress too.” Joey’s birthday was fast approaching and it was no secret that Nora took her gift giving practices very seriously.

“Nora may be a freak when it comes to giving people shit, but she usually does a pretty good job at it. She’s probably at some super niche corner store that sells unspeakable eldritch oddities.”

“Yeah, probably,” Alex said. “How long ago do you think those were sent? It looks pretty bright out in that picture.”

“Who knows, but look at that house,” Joey said. Alex leaned in to get a better view.

“Looks like any other dinky little house in the middle of nowhere. What of it?”

“If they got that dress from that house, maybe there's some more film worthy stuff to be found.”

“I guess, but how are we going to find out where they even are? It could take hours to send or receive a text out here.”

“Check this out,” Joey said, smugly. He opened an app on his phone that revealed a map of the United States. He zoomed in on a blue dot and tapped on it. The screen displayed the text: IRIS - Approximate Location Within Two Miles- Fifteen Minutes Ago.

“That’s creepy,” Alex said after reading the screen.

“Hey, it was her idea, man. She said it was a safety precaution or something.”

“Sounds like a lack of trust to me.”

“Whatever,” Joey said, trying his best to let that comment slide, “all I know is that we are driving to that approximate location and we are going to hit a gold mine of content. It won’t even be hard to find. We’ll just have to keep an eye out for that bright ass car.” Joey reexamined the map. “We can make it in thirty, no problem.”

“Doing what? One twenty?”

“I was thinking something more along the lines of one twenty-five.” Joey said as he sprinted off to his truck.

“What if they leave before we make it there?” Alex asked, following behind lackadaisically.

Joey turned on the ignition, and hit the gas the moment that Alex was in his seat. “We aren’t going to see *them*, we’re going to check out this old house that apparently just sells old dresses.”

“I believe people call that a yard sale, Joey. I don’t know how you’re going to sell this place any better than the school.”

“The goal is that I won’t have to sell it. Maybe I can even get the people that live there to agree to be in the video. I can see the title now: Living In Isolation - The Cold Reality of a Life of Confinement.” Joey’s mind filled with possibilities as they continued down the lonely road.

The ride itself was uneventful, but that was to be expected. Joey had promised Alex the aux cord for the ride back, so the roaring of the truck’s engine was drowned out by pop hits from the early 2000’s. It was far from Joey’s first choice, but still way better than the grunge-punk stuff that Alex played ninety percent of the time.

The sun was beginning to lower on the horizon as Joey and Alex entered the two mile radius of Iris’ location. Judging by what Joey could see on the GPS, there was really only one

road that she and Nora could have stopped on. The girls' location also hadn't been updated. Maybe they would get lucky and Iris would still be there. Nora probably wouldn't be happy to see him, though. It was painfully obvious that she was looking for a last minute birthday present, and him showing up would undoubtedly ruin her little surprise. He appreciated the effort, but he would be perfectly content with an Amazon gift card rather than some buried treasure out in the middle of nowhere.

“On your right,” Alex said, pointing ahead.

Iris' pink Volkswagon was like a beacon signaling that they had arrived at their destination. Her car certainly matched her outgoing personality, and Joey was truly enamored by the spectacle that was Iris. Her friendly and carefree nature was a stark contrast to his sister. He had always had a good bit of involvement with Iris considering that she visited his and Nora's family home essentially every week, but he had never anticipated forming a real relationship with her.

The last two months had been a blur, but a fun blur for sure. He and Iris were both at a mutual friend's party back at college. One thing led to another, and they ended up staying the night at Joey's apartment. Nora was sick that night. If she weren't, she definitely would have been at that party too, and that would have meant that Iris never would have gone home with Joey. Nora would have made certain of that. What sister would be okay with her brother sleeping with her best friend?

Since that night, Joey had made sure to avoid hanging out with Nora and Iris at the same time. It was his idea to keep it a secret; an idea that he was afraid he would soon have regrets over. Nora was always the overbearing older sibling, but she definitely cared about Joey. He couldn't help but feel that he would somehow be betraying her trust by dating her best friend.

How prolonging the inevitable made anything better, Joey had no clue, and yet, he chose to do it anyway.

“I honestly thought they would be gone by now,” Joey said, pulling into the driveway of the small house.

“Maybe it’s as interesting as you thought it would be,” Alex replied, unenthusiastically.

“Why do you look nervous?”

“Nervous? Me? I don’t even know what nervous is. I’m just being cautious.” Joey paused for a moment, “About Iris.”

“Oh shit,” Alex said, finally showing some excitement in his voice. “Nora really doesn’t know about you two.”

“Correct.”

“Well if she hasn’t blabbed about it up to this point, what makes you think she’ll do it now?”

“I don’t know. We haven’t really been around each other with Nora present. It’s only been a couple of months.”

“Dude, you gotta just come clean. Rip the bandage off. Screw the pooch. Shit the bed.”

“You’re just saying random shit that doesn’t make sense.”

“I know,” Alex said and laughed. “I just really want to see what happens when she finds out. Might as well tell her while I can be there to enjoy the fallout.”

“I don’t think now is the best time. I would rather wait…” Joey was cut off by an indistinguishable voice from outside his truck, followed by Alex screaming in terror.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you,” said an old woman standing right outside the passenger window. Joey rolled the window down, and Alex tried to collect himself. “You can

call me Gran Gran,” continued the old lady, her voice now much less muffled. “I was just taking some cookies out of the oven when I saw you boys pull in. I’m sorry to say that I’ve closed down my little sale for today. I just finished putting the last table up.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Joey said, fully prepared to make this old woman a part of his next video. We’re actually here because we heard about you from our friends. They drove here earlier. That’s their car right there.” Joey pointed to Iris’ car.

“Your friends?” Gran Gran said. Joey was unsure if it was a question or a statement. “Yes, they are very nice girls. What did they say?”

“They just told us that you have the most interesting house. I thought that they told you that we would be coming. Those rascals, always forgetting to tell people important information. Am I right, Alex?”

“Yeah, really rascally gals,” Alex said, still visibly shaken from Gran Gran’s sudden appearance.

“They’re already inside right? I hope it wouldn’t be too much of a bother for us to come in for a moment?”

“My house is a bit of a mess, dear. It might be best to come back next weekend. I told your friends the same thing, but they were just so eager to see my husband's things that I had to show them.”

“It must be quite the collection for them to still be looking around,” Joey said. He was eager to get Gran Gran to let him in, but also wary of the fact that Iris and Nora had been there for so long. “Plus, we have to have them home in time for dinner. You know how that is.”

“I would hate for them to miss dinner,” Gran Gran replied, seemingly weighing the situation. “I guess it can’t be helped. Come along you two, but please don’t mind the mess.”

Joey and Alex followed Gran Gran to the door and into the house. Immediately, Joey minded the mess. It was unlike anything he had ever seen before, a genuine hoarder house.

“I love the...” Alex paused for a moment, “walls. Very nice wallpaper.”

“Thank you, sweetie,” Gran Gran replied and smiled. Her accent and motherly mannerisms made Joey feel almost comfortable in the claustrophobic mess he had found himself in. “Why don’t you two have a seat in the living room and I’ll go get the girls from the back.” Gran Gran directed them to what was apparently meant to be a living room. There weren’t any visible splotches of carpet from the mountains of junk that filled the room. Joey seated himself on a chair that was stacked high with books and Alex wedged himself onto an open corner of a coffee table. “I’ll be right back,” Gran Gran said as she walked deeper into her mess of a home.

“Dude,” Alex whispered, “this is insane.” Joey eagerly nodded his head in response.

“Camera, now.” On command, Alex pulled the camera out of his backpack and started panning around the room. “Should we shoot an intro while she’s gone?”

“We probably should try. I doubt she wants people recording this abomination.”

Instantly, Alex stood up and backed into a corner of the living room. Joey looked around for the most visually repugnant place to stand. He decided to position himself next to a pile of decorative gnomes and a stack of old fedora-like hats. Joey gave Alex a thumbs up, and Alex began a silent countdown from three. After one, Joey began his soft spoken introduction.

“What’s going on, Joe Bros?” A catchy slogan was one of the keys to brand recognition that Joey never forgot. “Today, we’re in a real life hoarder house. Now, I know what you may be thinking: This is super different from the usual type of locale we hit up. That’s true! I’m actually

back home in the state of South Dakota for summer break, and that means it's the perfect time to give you a little taste of life back home."

Alex gave Joey a confused face from behind the camera and mouthed the words "what are you talking about" to him.

"This is what happens when you live out in the middle of nowhere," Joey continued. "No human interaction, only physical possessions to keep you company. What we have here is an extreme case of attachment to the material. What could have caused this? Perhaps a severed bond? Maybe a traumatic event? Stay tuned to find out."

"And cut," Alex said, lowering the camera. "That sounded pretty intense. People are going to wonder why you were basically whispering the whole time, though."

"It'll keep them in awe. Maybe they'll even think I'm in danger. We've had a drop in viewer retention time for the past few videos. Let's work on getting as many shots of the house as we can before the old lady comes back."

"Got it, boss. The kitchen looks like it could work as a good transition shot," Alex said as he sifted through the living room back towards the main hallway. We'll definitely need some footage of the outside before we leave.

"Sounds good to me. Let's hurry—" Joey stopped mid sentence as he heard the sound of footsteps approaching from deeper within the house. "Put the camera away," he said in a hurried whisper. Alex managed to stache the camera just in time before Gran Gran came into view.

"I'm so sorry boys," Gran Gran said as she waddled closer. "I'm afraid that we're going to need some help in the back. The girls want to take Harold's old mini piano, but it's just too heavy for us to move."

“Where the hell are they even going to put a mini piano? Iris’ car is way too small,” Joey said, questioning his sister and girlfriend’s critical thinking skills.

“They said that it could probably fit in the back of your truck,” Gran Gran said quickly.

“Oh, so you told them we were here,” said Joey.

“Of course, didn’t you say they were expecting you?”

“Right, they were, and my sister didn’t seem mad?”

“Sister? Oh, so you’re the brother she was talking about. Why would your sister be mad? You’re the reason we’re going to be able to move this old piano. Let’s head on to the back,” Gran Gran said, taking Joey by the arm and leading him down the hallway. “You too, young man,” she said, looking back at Alex.

“Oh, he can’t lift things. He has a bum knee,” Joey said, quickly. This was the perfect time for Alex to get more shots for the video. “Can he just wait in the living room while we move it.”

“I suppose it would be cruel to do otherwise,” Gran Gran said. “Now let’s get a move on.”

As Gran Gran led Joey down the hall, he looked back at Alex and Gave him a thumbs up. Alex reciprocated. Leave it to the world's greatest cameraman to be ready to play along with a trick on the elderly at a moment’s notice.

As Joey and Gran Gran proceeded down the hallway, they passed a number of doors. One of which was pink with a ton of stickers all over it. “Was that your kid’s room?” Joey asked, somewhat enthralled by the subtle creepiness of the flaking paint.

“It still is,” Gran Gran replied with a smile. “It’s my favorite room in the entire house.”

“That’s interesting,” Joey said, both genuinely interested and put off by Gran Gran’s excitement. “Do your kids come by often?”

“All the time,” Gran Gran paused, as if thinking for a moment. “Well, that’s not quite right. I visit *them* all the time.”

“I see, so the room is here for the memories then?”

“Oh, no, dear. Not unless you count memories that are still being made today.”

“I see.” Joey didn’t actually see at all. This whole conversation was honestly just confusing him, but when are old people ever not confusing? Unsure of what else to say, he continued his careful walk down the cluttered hall.

“Here we are,” Gran Gran said as they approached what had to have been the skinniest door that Joey had ever seen in his life.

“We’re going to push a piano through here?” Joey asked, knowing that it would be an impossible task.

“Don’t you worry, sweetie. There’s a back way. It’s just faster to get in this way.” Gran Gran opened the small door to reveal a pitch black room. The dim lighting from the hallway cast barely any illumination upon the void.

“Wow, it’s so dark in there. It’s almost like there’s nothing there at all.”

“Don’t worry, hun. The light’s on your left once you walk in.” Gran Gran motioned for Joey to go ahead, and he obliged. Upon his first step into the room he found that there was, in fact, truly nothing there at all. The last thing he saw as he plummeted into the void was Gran Gran’s smiling face, watching him from above.

Chapter 3 - (Iris Madison)

Iris Madison saw nothing, but she could definitely feel the suffocating weight of the rubble around her. Submerged in an ocean of junk from Gran Gran's secret room, her movement was extremely limited. She grabbed around for something to hold onto, but every time she did, she lost her grip and the mountain of items shifted around her. She was stuck, and panic was beginning to set in.

"Nora," Iris shouted, her screams surely being muffled by her surroundings, "Nora, can you hear me?"

There was no response.

Iris tried to recall exactly what happened. She had opened the door, a ton of things came crashing down towards her, and then the floor gave out. How far did she fall? It didn't hurt when she landed, so it couldn't have been a very long way down. Plus, she had fallen onto things that had already reached the ground before her. It was impossible to tell exactly what these things were since there was no source of light penetrating the pile of stuff that had landed on top of her after she had fallen. Thankfully most of the items were soft.

Iris Madison called out for Nora a few more times, but the result was the same. Hopefully Nora was all right. Iris Madison couldn't help but feel that it was her fault that the floor gave away. Nora did warn her not to walk too fast.

Tears began to form in her eyes. She always messed everything up, and now Nora was probably going to get in trouble because of her too. How were they going to pay for the property damage? Gran Gran was surely already giving Nora an earful for what she had done.

Eventually, Iris Madison's tears transformed into a full sob. Her breathing became heavy, and coupled with the tight space she was in, she began to hyperventilate.

"Do you hear that?" said a barely audible voice.

"Yeah, it sounds like a dog or something," another muffled voice replied.

"A dog! Do you think we could keep it if we dig it up?" the initial voice asked. The speaker sounded young. Iris Madison was unsure if it was a boy or a girl.

"You already know we can't do that. Think of all the extra supplies we would need to keep a dog." The other voice was definitely older and seemed to be coming from a male.

Iris Madison did her best to collect herself. She began to yell as loud as she possibly could, "Please help! I'm not a dog!"

"Did it just talk?" the young voice asked. "We have to keep it if it can talk! Dogs aren't supposed to do that."

"Clearly it isn't a dog, you idiot," the other voice said. "This is bad."

"Why's it bad?" the young voice asked.

"There's a person in there."

"Oh yeah, that is bad. Should we go back and tell someone?"

Iris Madison could not bear to be stuck any longer.

"You have to help me now," she yelled. "I'll suffocate if you leave me."

That may have been an exaggeration, but she would rather die than stay stuck any longer.

"I think we should help," the young voice said.

"Fine, but if anyone asks, you're the one who said to do this," the older voice said begrudgingly.

Iris Madison could hear the sounds of things being moved around. The two individuals seemed to be throwing things off of the mountain of Gran Gran's belongings to try and form a tunnel to her.

"This way! I'm over here!" she said repeatedly in an attempt to guide the strangers' efforts.

"Almost there," the younger voice said, enthusiastically. "I see a hand!"

"Go on and pull it," the older voice said.

Iris Madison felt a small hand grab onto her and begin to pull. She wiggled towards her rescuers. After a few moments of struggling, Iris Madison's upper half was finally free from the rubble. The rest of her body followed shortly after as she tumbled out of her prison. As she laid on the ground, she looked up at her two heroes. One was a young girl, she couldn't have been much older than twelve. The other was an older boy, maybe sixteen or so if she were to guess.

She looked back at the pile that she had been buried underneath. It was at least ten feet tall and almost double that in width. She then looked upwards and saw what she assumed to be the hole that had been created in Gran Gran's floor. It was at least twenty feet away from where she now stood. She reached around to her back pocket and pulled out her phone. The screen was cracked and she had no service. She had no way to call Nora.

"Are you going to stand up, or are you just going to keep looking at that thing in your hand?" the teenage boy asked. He was wearing what Iris Madison could only describe as "little chimney sweep" clothes. The type of stuff that you would see on a kid from decades ago: professional, and yet off-putting in its maturity at the same time.

“Are you tired? Need some gum?” the girl asked, holding out a pack of gum. She wore a dress with the same nostalgic touches. Her hair was a mess, as if she had just finished rolling around on the floor.

“Thank you,” Iris Madison said, taking a piece. “I love spearmint.”

“It’s pretty good, right?” said the girl. The older boy looked annoyed with her.

“Stop acting so nonchalant,” he said, “Who are you, and why were you buried underneath all that stuff?”

“You’re so serious. You remind me of my friend, Nora,” Iris Madison said. Upon mention of Nora’s name, she remembered that she wasn’t sure if Nora was okay or not. “Wait, have you seen her?”

“Who? Your friend?” the boy asked. “We haven’t seen her. You’re the first outsider I’ve ever seen. How did you even get here?”

Iris Madison pointed to the hole above.

“I fell through Gran Gran’s floor,” she said, still feeling guilty about what had happened. “I guess my friend is still up there.”

“Gran Gran?” the older boy said, seemingly unsure of what Iris Madison meant. “Was she an older woman with big hair?”

“Yes,” Iris Madison replied, “big poofy hair, super sweet, and a little weird. Oh, yeah, and she apparently likes Seven-Up and pancakes.”

“Do you think she’s talking about Mama?” the younger girl asked the boy. He nodded in affirmation.

“You’re her kids?” Iris Madison said. Her mouth was gaping in disbelief. “I thought the... um... parts stopped working like that when you got to her age.”

“We are not her biological children,” the boy replied. He seemed annoyed with Iris Madison’s comment. “We are her adoptive children. She has taken care of us since we were abandoned at a young age.”

“Yeah,” the young girl added, “she’s the best! She always brings us cool stuff that she finds outside, like that gum you’re chewing right now.” She blew a bubble with her own piece of gum she was chewing.

“That is pretty cool,” Iris Madison replied. “My mom never brought me any souvenirs when she went on business trips. She always said she was too busy to go shopping, but, honestly, I don’t know if I believe that because she would always post pictures of her at clubs and parties when she said that it was strictly business whenever she had to go out of town, but maybe I’m just being too judgemental.” Iris Madison had a bit more to add to her monologue, but she realized the two children in front of her had clearly tuned her out. “Anyway, why are you underneath Gran Gran’s house? I guess it is more spacious down here.”

The room that they were currently in definitely had a less claustrophobic atmosphere than all of the rooms in Gran Gran’s house combined. There were dim lights illuminating the room on the concrete walls, and other than the pile of things that had fallen down, the room was barren. A single hallway led out of the room with no visible end in sight.

“Isn’t it obvious why we’re down here?” the boy said. Judging by his tone, he seemed serious. She shook her head in disagreement, and he let out a sigh. “It’s because of the war.”

Iris Madison actually secretly prided herself in her history knowledge, it was the one subject that she always aced back in highschool. Despite this, she was fairly certain that she had never heard of the war that this boy was talking about. She thought about it a bit more, and did

her best to think of what he could possibly be talking about. “Oh, I know,” she finally said, “it’s the war on drugs!”

“What is that?” the young girl asked.

“She’s just messing with us,” the boy responded. “Everyone knows about the War Against Children.”

“Yeah! WAC! I know all about it,” the girl said, giddy with excitement.

“It’s not something to take lightly, Agatha. It’s the reason we can’t go to the surface.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Her voice shifted to a tone that feigned anger. “WAC! I know all about it.”

“Your name’s Agatha?” Iris Madison asked. “That’s so cute. My best friend has an old person name too. Isn’t that funny?”

“What’s an old person’s name?” Agatha asked. “Do you have a not-old person name?”

A chance to introduce herself. Iris Madison relished the opportunity. “My name is Iris Madison Huxley, but you can call me Iris Madison.” She took a small bow.

“You have three names?” Agatha said, seemingly enamored by Iris Madison’s response.

“Well technically, yes, I do have three names,” Iris Madison replied, “but I only told you two of them. My first name is Iris Madison, my last name is Huxley, and my middle name is Pearl. It’s my birthstone.” She always loved getting to tell people that piece of trivia about herself. “Everyone always thinks that I go by my first and middle name, but that’s not true. Iris Madison *is* my whole first name. I don’t get why no one ever listens to me. Even my boyfriend just calls me Iris.”

“Ooo a boyfriend. Looks like you're out of luck, Otis,” Agatha said to the boy. Iris Madison found the name Otis to be funny as well, but she had no time to comment on it before the boy began to defend himself.

“What are you talking about,” Otis said, a bit flustered. “Why would you even talk like that? I would never want to date an outsider. Plus she’s old.”

“I’m not old! Twenty is not old!” Iris Madison said, desperate to defend her youth.

“So you’d rather date someone from down here?” Agatha said, continuing to tease Otis. “Last I checked we were all brothers and sisters, and I read a book that said that you can’t date your brothers and sisters.”

“Just shut up,” Otis said, “you don’t know anything about anything.”

“She has a point. That is a weird thing to do,” Iris Madison said. “How many of you are down here anyway? It’s like a little secret society.”

“Fifteen and counting,” Agatha said.

“Fourteen. We don’t count *Him*.”

“Well he’s still down here, isn’t he?”

“Unfortunately.” Otis' face seemed to darken as he spoke. “He’s lucky Mama is so forgiving.”

“Who is *he*? What’d he do?” Iris Madison was enthralled by the sudden mystery.

“He was ungrateful for the life that Mama has worked so hard for us, and he tried to ruin it for everyone. Now he is being punished,” Agatha spoke almost as if she were reading a script.

“Yikes,” said Iris Madison. “Are we talking about no toys for a month, or is it some old school paddling, or maybe no dessert for a week?”

“He’s in solitary confinement for the foreseeable future,” Otis said, bluntly. “The helpers are the only ones who interact with him now. He gets his basic necessities and nothing more.”

“That sounds kind of harsh,” Iris Madison said. The kids were already creepy enough, but talks of solitary confinement were making her feel like this situation may be even worse than it seemed to be. “I hope that doesn’t happen to you two as well,” she paused for a moment, “or to me.”

“It wouldn’t!” Agatha said, confidently. “He was really really bad. The worst! I would still forgive him, though. I read a book about the importance of second chances last week.”

As Agatha continued to ramble about her book, Iris Madison scanned the room, looking for a way to get back up to the surface. The room was extremely minimalistic. There was the hallway with no conceivable end, but upon closer inspection of the walls, Iris Madison noticed a metal door in one of the corners.

“They call it Psychology,” Agatha said, still rambling. “It’s all about how people feel and what—”

“What’s that over there?” Iris Madison said, pointing to the door.

“That’s how Mama brings us things,” Otis replied. “That’s also why we are here. We heard a loud crash, but it wasn’t the normal noise that plays over the speakers when Mama opens the door. We were sent to make sure everything was okay.”

“So if I go through this door, I’ll be able to leave?”

“Yes,” Otis said, “but you can’t go through that door.”

“What? Why?”

“It only opens from the other side.”

“Why on earth would it only open from the other side?”

“For our own safety,” Agatha said. “Sometimes, when there’s a new brother or sister. They don’t know that it’s not safe outside, so Mama made it so no one can open the door to make sure no one puts us in danger.”

Iris Madison approached the door and upon further inspection, she saw that there was no handle. She attempted to fit her fingernails in the crevice between the door and its frame, but it was so tight that she couldn’t even do that much. Running out of options, she began to bang on the door and call out for Nora.

“What are you doing?” Otis asked. “You look stupid.”

“I want out,” Iris Madison said, doing her best to keep her composure, “You both seem really nice and sweet, but you also live in a hole underground and you are wearing weird old person clothes and it’s all kind of creepy.” She paused and took some deep breaths to gather her composure. “Is there a ladder or something I can use to just go back up the way I came from?”

Agatha looked up at the hole. “Do they make ladders that tall?”

“You’re freaking out for no reason,” Otis said. He seemed almost annoyed with Iris Madison’s behavior. “Mama will be down here no later than the end of the day tomorrow. Sunday is grocery day. We’ll just make sure to have you back here by then.”

“You’ll have me back here?” Iris Madison said. “I don’t want to go anywhere, especially not down that creepy hallway.”

“I guess you can stay here all night if you want. Maybe people on the surface just don’t like warm food and beds like we do down here.”

“Those are two of my top five favorite things,” Iris Madison said.

“Mine too!” Agatha chimed in.

“Follow or don’t. It’s up to you,” Otis said as he turned and walked to the hallway. Agatha followed after him. “Plus, you’ll know if your friend comes down here when the door chime plays, so there’s really no point in waiting here for her. You can hear it from everywhere down here.”

Iris Madison weighed her options. She didn’t want to sit alone in this room for who knows how long. The two kids were a little weird but they were nice, at least, Agatha was nice. She was also starting to get really hungry. She and Nora had skipped breakfast and lunch because Nora said they didn’t have time to waste on things like food. Would they have macaroni and cheese in their little secret child society? Iris Madison absolutely loved macaroni and cheese, and she would kill to have some at that moment. Just the thought of it made her decide that the trip would be worth it.

It was decided, she would follow the kids for now. Surely Nora and Gran Gran would come down soon to let her out.

“Wait for me,” Iris Madison said as she raced to catch up with Agatha and Otis. “If my friend comes down to get me will I really know that she’s here?”

“Of course,” Otis replied. “Mama has a sound system set up to make announcements once she drops off her groceries or if she needs to tell us anything. Every room down here has a speaker, so that she can always reach us. It’s the same system that plays a noise whenever the door opens.”

“Why do you think she hasn’t made an announcement about me being down here? Don’t you think she would want to let you all know that I fell down here?”

“Mama is a very busy woman,” Agatha replied. “She probably knew that we would find you and take care of you until she was able to come down again. It’s no easy task coming down

here, you know. She told us that she has doors and doors and doors with locks and locks and locks to make sure no one gets in here.” Iris Madison was amazed by Gran Gran’s commitment to security. “And,” Agatha continued, “she even told us that it takes her thirty minutes just to get all of the doors unlocked! And then, she has to climb down the ladder to get to the big metal door. How impressive is that?”

That was quite impressive. Gran Gran didn’t seem incapable of moving around, but she certainly didn’t strike Iris Madison as the type of person to be climbing up and down ladders. However, it did make her all the more curious of what exactly she was hiding these kids from.

They continued down the long hallway. It had slight turns which made it impossible to tell exactly how long it was.

“How far are we going?” Iris Madison asked.

“It’s about a ten minute walk from the door to the common room. Mama had this part especially made to connect to underneath her home,” Otis replied.

“She cared so much about children that she went out of her way to connect her home to a series of fallout shelters underground. How sweet is that?” Agatha said.

“Fallout shelter?” Iris Madison asked. “Like for bombs?”

“Yep,” Agatha replied, “I read a book for this one too. Apparently, a long time ago, bad countries were trying to build bombs to get rid of everyone in the United States, so they built underground shelters to make the people safe if the bombs ever came. They never came though, so now we get to use them!”

“So, you’re in these old tunnels because of a war? I’ve not heard of any wars, though,” Iris Madison said. “You called it the War Against Children. What is that, exactly?”

“It’s awful,” Agatha said. “Every country in the world has grown jealous of America’s economic power, so they have sent in a bunch of spies to kidnap children and get rid of them covertly. They’re trying to take away the future of America! That’s why you’ve probably never heard of it. They’re really sneaky about it.”

“Did you read this in a book too?” Iris Madison asked. This little girl certainly had an active imagination. It reminded her of when she used to make her stuffed animals fight her dolls in a dance battle to the death when she was little.

“It’s more nuanced than what she’s saying,” Otis replied. “There are no books on the WAC though. Mama has told us all about it. It’s not only a war against children, but also a war against information. The everyday person is completely ignorant to the fact that it is going on. Look at yourself as an example.”

“Wait, you believe this thing too? For real?” Iris Madison still wasn’t sure if they were just playing a prank on her.

“It’s a hard truth to swallow,” Otis said. “I’ve got to say, it is sad seeing someone so ignorant to the reason we all are in this situation. You’re a part of the problem.”

“What? I’m the opposite of problematic! Do you know how many pride walks I’ve been on in the last year? Two! Two pride walks. In one year!” Iris Madison couldn’t believe the nerve of Otis.

“What is she talking about, Otis?” Agatha asked.

“Who knows. She might be a little—” he pointed to his head and moved his finger in a little circle.

“I am not crazy! You’re the children living in some old lady’s nuclear bomb shelter.”

“Poor girl,” Agatha said. “Don’t worry, though. We can teach you all about it.” Was Iris Madison crazy? No. The kids were crazy. She was the only normal part of this situation.

“If Nora were here, she would tell you that you’re the ones that don’t make any sense,” Iris Madison said. A few more minutes passed of indistinguishable bland hallway walking. “When are we going to be done walking? I would have worn tennis shoes today if I knew this was going to happen.”

“This is the last bend,” Agatha said.

As the trio walked past the final bend, a giant open area revealed itself. It was much more well illuminated than the long winding hallway thanks to a grandiose chandelier hanging from the high roof in the center of the room. The space was probably twice the height of what you would normally expect of a standard room. It was the shape of a circle, and as Iris Madison and company entered the chamber, she was able to see a multitude of hallways, at least eight, branching out in every direction from the circular space.

There were children scattered throughout the big room, boys and girls of greatly varying ages. There was an area that looked like a playground with three very young children. One was pushing another on a swing, and the third was laying on the ground, doing what appeared to be snow angels in the woodchip-filled area.

There were also benches and tables scattered throughout the entire room. It somewhat reminded Iris Madison of an indoor mall. There was another child, a girl, sitting on one of the benches reading some sort of book. It was too far away to discern what the book was, but the girl looked quite invested as she didn’t even take notice of Iris Madison.

“Hey, everyone,” Agatha said, skipping towards the center of the room. “Look at what we found.” She pointed to Iris Madison, and all of the children in the room looked up. They seemed shocked.

“Hello, My name is Iris Madison. Nice to meet you all.” A few of the children looked at each other and whispered. A girl that Iris Madison had not noticed before was staring at her from across the room. She looked noticeably older than the rest. She may have even been a young adult. Her gaze was piercing. That, coupled with the awkward silence was starting to make Iris Madison uncomfortable. Luckily, a high pitched voice shattered it.

“A new sister,” a boy, no older than three shouted from the playground area. The kid raced towards Iris Madison as fast as his stumpy legs could carry him. Once he reached her, he hugged her leg tightly. The other two children that were on the playground quickly followed suit. The book girl put her manuscript down and walked over to Iris Madison as well.

“How old are you?” asked one of the playground children.

“How did you get your hair to look like that?” the other one asked. “It’s so curly.”

“You’re so much older than everyone else,” said the book girl. “Where did Mama find you?”

“Oh, well.” Iris Madison felt bombarded by all of the questions coming in at once. Suddenly, a commanding voice from across the room caught everyone’s attention.

“Give her a minute, everyone. I’m sure she’ll be happy to answer all of your questions in a minute. Let me have a talk with her first,” said the older girl with the piercing stare. She motioned for Iris to come over. She, Agatha, and Otis followed.

“Why do they get to talk with her but we don’t?” said one of the playground kids.

“We never get to do any of the fun stuff,” said another.

“You get to play on the playground every day,” said the older girl. “If you would rather cook dinner tonight and have me be the one on the playground, that’s fine by me.”

“No thanks,” said one of the playground children, as they rushed back to the swings, giggling.

“Come with me,” the older girl said. She walked over to a door and entered a room that looked to be a kitchen. It was packed with old equipment, but it seemed to have all of the tools you would expect to see in any kitchen. There was water boiling on the stove and something in a pan. Whatever was being cooked smelled delicious.

“My name is Edith. You said yours was Iris Madison, correct?” She spoke in a very matter of fact tone, almost as if she were conducting an interview.

“That is correct,” said Iris Madison. Iris Madison withheld the fact that she thought Edith sounded like an old person's name too. She figured Edith would not find that as funny of a coincidence as she did. “I fell down here by accident.”

“Fell down? Otis, tell me what happened.”

“It’s like she said,” Otis replied. “We found her near the door. She was buried under a massive pile of random junk, and way above her was a gaping hole. She said she was in Mama’s house when the floor collapsed.”

“And you think she’s trustworthy?” Edith asked. “You do know how dangerous it is having an outsider down here. You could be putting everyone in danger.”

“I think she’s okay. Honestly, she seems a little, how do I put it—” Otis paused to think. “Not the smartest.”

“Hey!” Iris Madison said, hurt that Otis thought so little of her.

“Plus,” Agatha jumped in, “she just wants to leave anyway, so we thought why not just let her stay with us until Mama opens the door for groceries tomorrow?”

“I suppose there’s not much else we can do,” Edith said. She appeared to be sizing up Iris Madison as she spoke. “When Mama comes down, she will be able to tell us whether or not we can trust her. Until then, we’ll make sure someone is always keeping an eye on her. This is something that the older kids should do, so I’ll leave it up to me, you, and Clifford. Got it, Otis?”

“Yeah, I got it,” Otis said. He seemed a bit annoyed with his task.

“What about me? I’m pretty old too,” Agatha said, clearly upset. “Older than most, anyway.”

“I know she doesn’t look dangerous,” Edith said to Agatha, “but it’s always better to be safe than sorry.” Agatha looked genuinely disappointed. Iris Madison started to feel bad for her, but then remembered that they were arguing over who got to be her parole officer. “I’ll tell you what, why don’t you go and find Clifford and tell him all about what’s going on. You can be our informant while we’re watching her.”

“Yay! I’m the information gatherer,” Agatha said as she skipped out of the room.

“Otis, you don’t let her out of your sight until after dinner. I’ll take over after that.”

“Fine,” Otis said, disinterested. “I don’t see the point, though. I mean, look at her.” Iris Madison was starting to get tired of the backhanded remarks. She could be scary if she really wanted to. She used to scare the kids that would come by her house on Halloween to trick-or-treat.

“It’ll be ready in about an hour,” Edith said.

She walked over to the pot of water on the stove and added some salt to it.

“What is it?” Iris Madison asked as her stomach began to take control of her mouth.

“Spaghetti. Saturday night is always spaghetti night,” she responded.

“So close to macaroni,” Iris Madison said quietly to herself, disappointed in the noodles for the night.

“What was that?” asked Edith.

“Oh, nothing. I’m just excited to eat.”

“Well in the meantime maybe you could go and entertain the little ones. Looks like most everyone is in their rooms right now, so it shouldn’t be too overbearing for you. Otis, don’t let her wander off. Keep her in the common area. Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Otis said. He ushered Iris Madison out of the kitchen.

Upon stepping back into the large common area, Iris Madison was immediately greeted by the little girl from the playground who had asked about her hair. She was holding a brush and some hair ties.

“Can you show me how you do it?” she asked.

“I don’t know if I can curl your hair like mine with just a brush and some ties, but I can do something even cooler,” Iris Madison said. The girl’s eyes seemed to widen with excitement.

“Really?” she asked.

“Really really,” Iris Madison said. She looked around for a place to sit. “Let’s go to the playground. Me and my best friend used to braid each other’s hair all the time in the little tubes at the fast food restaurant playgrounds.”

“How is food fast?” the girl asked. Otis sighed dramatically as Iris Madison told the girl about the wonders of drive-thrus on their walk to the playground.

Chapter 4 - (Nora)

The world felt like it was spinning in a circle, and maybe it was. Nora couldn't actually tell because she couldn't see anything at all. Her head felt like it was filled with a pile of bricks; bricks that were being smashed to bits by a jackhammer. She considered the possibility of being trapped in purgatory. It was a disappointing thought, because Nora always figured that, if there were some form of consciousness after death, it wouldn't be as lame as a black void with nothing but nagging head pain to keep her occupied.

“Nora? Nora, can you hear me?” said a faint voice from the abyss. Was it God? No, this voice sounded like it was coming from a woman. Did God actually sound like a woman? Maybe that was the case. Nora was truly intrigued by the feminine divine voice that was calling out to her.

“I can hear you,” is what Nora wanted to say, but she found that she wasn't able to say anything at all. It took too much effort to even try and open her mouth. She felt tired, and the voice was starting to get a bit annoying. “Nora Nora Nora” over and over again. Was God really this needy? She decided that she was done listening to the rambling voice, so she closed her eyes, not that it made any visual difference, and she went to sleep.

“You have three names?” said a shrill, kid-like voice, waking Nora from her short lived slumber. Turns out purgatory isn't so lonesome afterall. She wondered what other odd voices would make their way into her ears. Did she still have ears? She reached up to check. It was a difficult task, almost as if she were stuck in quicksand. After a brief struggle, she confirmed that her ears were, in fact, still there.

She heard another voice. It sounded like it could have been a man. Then three voices were talking to each other. It was hard to make out what they were talking about. There was some mention of psychology and doors, but none of it interested Nora in her current state. Sleeping is what sounded best right now, and so she drifted back into unconsciousness.

It felt as if she were floating through space without a care in the world. She reached her arms out to swim through the sea of stars that were now before her. This was perfect, a life free of worries, a life free of obligations, paradise.

Something about that didn't feel quite right, though. Shouldn't she be worried about something right now? Nora was always busy and she always had something that she needed to be doing. She must be forgetting something important. As she thought harder and harder about what it was she was meant to be doing, the sea of stars she had imagined disappeared. She was once again in total darkness.

A scream pierced through the abyss and reached Nora's ears like a siren going off in her head. She felt a strong thud just above her.

"Jesus Christ," said a voice from above.

"Jesus is here too?" Nora said, finally managing to get her mouth to produce sound.

"What the hell," the voice screamed. "Who is that? Where am I?"

"You sound like a scaredy cat, Jesus," Nora said, amused by the voice's reaction. "I thought you would sound more manly."

"Nora, is that you?" said the voice. In a moment, the darkness that had encapsulated Nora was broken by a small hole above her. She looked up to see her brother, Joey, staring down at her. At the sight of his face, Nora instantly remembered what it was that she was forgetting.

“What are you doing here?” she asked. Her voice was shaky, but she did her best to make her anger apparent.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Joey said. He reached an arm down towards Nora and pulled her up out of the darkness. She now found herself on a giant pile of what she could only describe as *things*. They were assorted knick knacks from Gran Gran’s house. She began to recall the events that had just transpired. Iris made the floor collapse and now she was dead, or at least she had thought she was dead.

“You aren’t supposed to be here,” Nora said, still managing to be frustrated that Joey was intruding on her present hunting adventure.

“I don’t think either of us are,” replied Joey. “What is this place?”

Nora took her first good look around. It looked like some kind of concrete prison. She looked up and saw the hole from which she had fallen. “Did you just jump down?” she asked.

“Some crazy old hag told me to walk into this room, and then I just fell. There was no floor.”

“Well you can blame Iris for that,” Nora replied. “Wait, where’s Iris?” Nora stood up on the pile of items and began to throw things around, digging into its thick husk. She called out to Iris but there was no response.

“She fell down here too?” Joey asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

“Oh God, I hope she isn’t dead,” Nora said, still frantically throwing random items off of the pile. Joey joined in and the two called out to Iris together. “I don’t even know how long I’ve been down here. What time was it when you got here?”

“I don’t know. It’s probably close to seven now.”

“Shit,” Nora said. She remembered it being around three when she checked the time earlier. “It’s been at least a couple hours. Why hasn’t Gran Gran called the police yet?”

“I hate to break it to you, Nora, but that old lady isn’t going to be calling the police. She literally had me walk into a giant hole and smiled diabolically as I fell. That is some grade A evil shit right there.”

Nora surveyed the room. She saw a metal door and a long hallway. She stopped her sifting through the pile to go check the door, but stopped immediately as her head began to pound. She winced and rubbed her temples to try and ease the pain.

“You okay?” Joey asked.

“I must have hit my head on something when I fell. Just go check that door for me, okay?”

The fall was a complete blur to Nora. Judging from how far they had fallen, she was lucky to have landed on what appeared to be mostly clothing. She had no doubt that fall could have killed her if she hit the concrete floor directly. Her head, however, did not seem to receive as fortunate a treatment as the rest of her body. Scattered throughout the pile was a bowling ball, some dumbbells, and of course, the treadmill Iris had uncovered before they plummeted. There certainly was no shortage of possibilities as to what could be the cause of her current ailment.

Joey approached the door and ran his hands around it for a moment.

“This door sucks,” he said. “It doesn’t even have a handle.” He threw his hands up and walked back to Nora. “I guess we have to wait for Alex to figure something out.” After saying this, Joey’s eyes widened, he looked as if he had just made some sort of grand revelation.

“Where’s my phone?” He frantically patted his pants pockets and pulled out his phone.

“I hardly had any service up there,” Nora said, already sure that whatever Joey was planning would fail. “What makes you think we would have a connection down here?”

“Who said anything about service,” Joe said, a smile creeping across his face. “You know what this is?” He pointed to the camera on his phone.

“You’re kidding.” Joey was really thinking about recording at a time like this.

“The story is insane, and not only that,” Joey said, excitement in his voice building, “it’s a real story! I can’t remember the last time I didn’t have to bullshit a whole made up backstory. Obviously it would have been better if Alex was the one who fell down since he has the camera, but beggars can’t be choosers, I guess.”

“Joey,” Nora said, “this is bad, I don’t think—”

“This is the best birthday present ever! Even better than the camera,” Joey said, stopping Nora from speaking. Hearing his words made her feel oddly happy for a brief moment. That moment of brevity was quickly interrupted by a quick shock of pain in her head. The sensation must of made her come to her senses.

“I’m glad you’re happy,” Nora said, “but we are in some creepy underground room, and Iris is missing. We have to find her and then find a way out of here.” Nora looked up at the ceiling. It was an impressively long way up. It made her worried about the state of her head injury even more.

“Shit,” Joey said, “you’re right. Maybe she went down that hallway and found a way out already. You said it’s been a while since you guys fell, right?”

“I hope that’s what happened.” Nora looked at the massive pile again. She couldn't help but imagine her friend, already dead underneath its crushing weight.

“Let’s hurry up and see where it leads,” Joey said, immediately taking the lead. He sounded less theatrical in that moment, almost as if he had a moment of complete sincerity. Nora wasn’t used to hearing that. “Make sure you stay behind me, so you don’t get in the shot.” And with that, he was back to his normal self.

Nora followed a few paces behind Joey as they traversed the winding concrete pathway. She imagined this was some sort of fallout bunker that was constructed years ago, but the strangeness of the long hallway was making her second guess herself. It would make sense if the hallway was descending deeper underground, but the floor was completely flat. Where on earth could this tunnel lead to?

“Where do you think this thing goes?” Joey asked, clearly undergoing a similar line of thinking as Nora.

“Oh, am I allowed to talk?” Nora asked, sarcastically. “If I can’t be on camera, I figured my voice shouldn’t be heard either.” Joey was extremely controlling with who was allowed to be involved in his videos ever since he had picked up the hobby. Nora had even asked to be involved in one of his expeditions before but he had told her that she “wasn’t made for the camera.” Unfortunately, the success of his videos left her little room to fire back insults of her own.

“Your face is harder to remove in post than your voice. That’s short for post-processing by the way,” Joey replied.

“I know what it means.” Nora was going to be harder on Joey after his presumption of her video editing vocabulary, but talking was making her head hurt more than it already was. “I just hope wherever it leads, it leads to Iris.”

“Yeah, me too,” Joey said. “Leave it to her to just wander off in a situation like this.”

Nora and her brother continued walking down the corridor for what felt like an eternity. The length of this strange passageway only served to build on Nora's curiosity of what exactly they had fallen into.

"Do you really think Gran Gran tricked you into falling down here on purpose?" Nora asked. The woman was strange, there was no doubt about that, but she didn't strike her as a malevolent person.

"I'm telling you," Joey said, "her face had 'evil' written all over it. I bet you guys didn't even want that piano."

"Piano? What piano?" Nora asked.

"See. I knew it. Evil."

After a slight bend in the hallway, the siblings abruptly found themselves in a large open space. The room had a mish mash of odd decorative pieces ranging from a playground to a fancy chandelier in the center. Whoever arranged the place certainly was no expert in interior design.

"Woah," Joey said, panning his phone camera around the strange room, "this is insane. What is this place?"

"Iris," Nora shouted, "are you in here?" There was no response, only a faint echo of her own voice coming back through the numerous hallways that shot out in every direction from the room.

"Check out all these books," Joey said. He began flipping through one of the many books that were lined from the floor to the ceiling in a tall bookcase. "I think I had this same textbook for sixth grade science."

"Yeah, yeah, really cool stuff, but where's Iris?" Nora was beginning to fear that she had not made it out of the pile.

“Maybe we should split up and check each one of these halls?” Joey asked.

Nora counted the number of offshooting hallways from the big room. There were seven, not including the one they had come from.

“If they’re as long as the one we just got out of, who knows how long that would take?” Nora asked, desperately trying to think of some other solution.

Without warning, Joey whipped his phone towards Nora and pointed it at something behind her. She turned around to see a small child wearing some old fashioned clothing staring at them. In an instant, the kid ran down one of the halls.

“We gotta follow that kid,” Joey said. Nora nodded in agreement, hoping that the child would have some sort of information as to where Iris might be.

Nora and Joey raced down the hallway. Nora could see that Joey was doing his best to hold his phone steady as they ran. Not long after they entered the hallway, they heard voices coming from the otherside of a door.

“I’m serious, I really saw them,” said a child’s voice from behind the closed door.

“This is bad,” said an older sounding voice. “I can run to the armory.”

“What should we—” Nora said, but before she could finish her question, Joey opened the door and walked into the room. Nora followed, immediately stunned and horrified by what she saw. It was a dining room. There was a long table lined with plates and utensils. The cutlery was not what shocked Nora, though, it was the lines of children sitting at the table, all dressed equally as strange as the one before. There were at least ten of them sitting at the table. Some had noodles peeking out of the corners of their mouths and some looked to just be playing with

whatever it was they were supposed to be eating. A gramophone playing classical music served to exacerbate the peculiarity of it all.

Some of the children, particularly three of the older-looking ones, two boys and a girl, appeared quite defensive.

“Who are you and how did you get here?” asked the girl. To call her a girl might have been a stretch. She very well could have been eighteen, or maybe it was the old clothes making her appear that way.

“I think the better question is how did *you* get here?” Joey asked, pointing the camera at the girl. She looked quite annoyed by his accusation. Why did her brother have to be so stupidly brash all the time? She needed to save the situation from getting bad. Whatever they were intruding on could not be good.

“What he means to say is we’re surprised that there are people down here. Especially this many people,” Nora said, trying to make amends for her brother’s rude introduction. “We fell through a hole and ended up down here.”

“Do you think she’s the one Iris Madison has been talking about?” said a young girl from the other side of the table. “The one who was with her when she fell?”

“What’s your name?” asked the older girl.

“Nora, and this is my brother, Joey. You know Iris? We came here looking for her. Is she okay?”

A flush followed by the sound of running water was heard from a neighboring room. Moments later, a door opposite to the one Nora and Joey had entered opened, revealing the formerly missing Iris.

“You guys!” Iris said. She approached Joey with her arms out but quickly retracted them in awkward fashion as if she had made some sort of mistake. She held her hand out for a handshake and shook Joey’s hand. “Good to see you, Joey.” Iris winked as she completed the strange action.

“Good to see you too,” Joey said, matching Iris’ awkward energy.

Iris then turned her attention to Nora.

“Nora!” she shouted as she threw her arms around her. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“And I’m so glad you’re not dead,” Nora said. She finally felt that she could relax a bit despite the growing number of questions she had. “Could you, maybe, explain what exactly is going on right now?”

“Of course,” Iris said excitedly, “Starting on the end of the table we have Agatha, then Tabitha, then George, then Linda, then—”

“Wait, wait,” Nora had to stop Iris before she named every single child at the table. “I mean *why* are there kids down here?”

“Oh, yeah,” Iris said, “Agatha, do you want to explain it? You seem to like doing that.” She looked to one of the girls at the end of the table, presumably Agatha.

“I think we should let Tabitha explain. She still needs a lot of work on her history,” said Agatha.

“I’m trying my best,” said a girl, no older than six, next to Agatha.

“I appreciate your devotion to teaching your younger siblings their history,” said the older, skeptical looking girl from before, “but I think it would be best if I filled our guests in on everything they need to know.”

“That would be great,” said Joey, “Could you go ahead and do that, because, right now, I’ve got a lot of useless footage of kids eating spaghetti. Did you know you can’t monetize videos that have minors in them?” Joey shifted his camera’s focus solely on the older girl. “You are at least eighteen, right? Actually, don’t answer that.”

“My name is Edith,” said the older girl, “and I am seventeen years old.”

“Damn it,” Joey said under his breath.

“I am the oldest one here, and as such, I have assumed somewhat of a leadership role in our family.”

“Well, technically there is someone who is older than her,” Agatha said from across the room.

“Not now, Agatha,” said Edith, cutting her off. She seemed to command decent control of the group of kids. They all had their eyes on her, even the youngest of them, and they couldn’t have been much older than three. “We are refugees of a war known as the War Against Children. I assume that you have met our mother, just as Iris Madison did. You call her Gran Gran I presume?”

“That crazy old lady is your mom?” Joey said.

“I was surprised too,” said Iris, “but don’t worry, they’re adopted.”

“My brother told me that he was tricked into falling down here by your mother,” Nora said, trying to get a better feel for the relationship these children had with Gran Gran.

“Mama doesn’t play tricks,” said a young boy.

“Bartholomew, no speaking while I’m discussing things with the guests,” Edith said sternly. The boy hung his head in shame. “He does have a point, though. Our mother is not the type to do something like that. Maybe the fall has tampered with your memory.”

“Falls can do that,” said Agatha from across the room. “I read about it.”

“What’s this War Against Children thing?” Nora asked. She also doubted the reality of such a thing. The more she heard from Edith, the more concerned she was growing in Gran Gran’s character.

“Judging from Iris Madison’s reaction to our explanation, I am going to assume you will also choose to not believe us if we tell you.”

“Could you tell us anyway?” Joey said. “You can’t make a good video without a good story.”

“To fully grasp the War against Children, you would need multiple hours of lessons and exams to evaluate your knowledge on the subject, so I’ll just give you the shortened summary.”

Nora was starting to feel like she was inconveniencing Edith with her own lack of knowledge.

“The War Against Children is a war that teeters on a fine line of espionage and sociological tampering.”

“I don’t even know what those words mean!” said Iris.

“Essentially,” Edith continued, “the War Against Children is a prolonged war initiated by the enemies of the United States to kidnap children from their homes and turn them into foreign spies. Thousands of children go missing each day, and hardly anyone notices. This is because children of impoverished families are targeted. The news outlets don’t cover these missing persons cases because most of the time, they don’t even get reported. Sometimes, the children are even given up voluntarily. All of us here were saved from that fate by our mother.”

Joey began clapping after Edith finished her speech.

“That was incredible,” he said. “I’ve never heard such an unbelievable yet enthralling tale. So, why are you actually here?” Edith’s brow furrowed after hearing Joey’s comment. “Don’t

worry,” he continued, “I can play your story up for the camera. I’m sure tons of people would eat this up. I mean there’s a pretty big number of flat earthers out there, so this should be an easy sell.”

“I don’t think she’s joking, Joey,” Nora said. Did Gran Gran really brainwash all of these kids into believing that crazy story? She began to pity the children, almost as much as she pitied herself for having to deal with having fallen into this situation.

“She’s definitely not joking,” Iris chimed in. “When I was braiding Ingrid’s hair earlier, she told me all about her class lessons about WAC. She’s only six, but she’s already about to take the exam on the history of the war! That’s so impressive.” Iris did a little golf clap and smiled towards the only girl with braided hair.

Joey tapped his phone screen and flipped the camera to record himself.

“Looks like we’re in some sort of pseudo-insane asylum for little kids. If I don’t make it out, make sure you don’t unsubscribe from the channel. Alex has the password and he will carry on my legacy.”

“Could you take this seriously for one second?” Nora said, growing tired of Joey’s constant snide remarks. “Edith, how do we get out of here? We don’t want any trouble, we just want to go home.”

“After we take the grand tour, of course,” Joey said, quickly.

“The door near where you fell down,” Edith said, “that’s where you can leave. Mama will be making a grocery delivery tomorrow.”

“We have to stay here all night?” Nora asked. “Can’t you contact your mom somehow and let her know we need to leave now?”

“We have a one way communication system, unfortunately,” Edith replied. “Whenever Mama needs to speak to us, we can hear her voice on the speakers throughout our home. However, she can not hear us unless she is here in person.”

“Don’t worry,” said one of the kids from the table, “the beds here are really comfy.”

“Are we having a slumber party?” another child asked.

“Can you braid my hair too, Iris Madison?” another voice said.

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but we’ll be keeping an eye on you until you leave. We aren’t used to strangers being here, so we’re a bit on edge,” Edith said. “Since there are three of you, we will have the three oldest children keep an eye on you.” She turned to one of the older boys sitting near her. “Otis, you will continue to watch Iris Madison since you’ve already been doing so.” The boy named Otis sighed heavily. “Clifford,” she said to the other boy, “you watch the boy.”

“Man,” Joey said, “he’ll watch the man. And the man’s name is Joey, by the way.”

“I apologize,” Edith said. “Clifford will watch Joey, and I will watch Iris Madison’s friend, Nora. All I ask is that you don’t leave your assigned person’s sight.”

“What if I have to piss?” Joey asked. “I don’t think it would be ethically okay for this guy to be in my sight while I do that.”

“With reasonable exceptions, of course,” Edith said.

Joey started to make some other annoying comment when Nora’s head began hurting more than it had before. She nearly fell to the floor, but Joey managed to catch her. A constant pulse ran across her forehead. It felt as if some parasite were trying to escape her skull.

“What’s wrong?” Iris asked. Her face was fuzzy to Nora, almost like there were two Irises.

“Head. Hurt,” Nora managed to say.

“She must have hit her head when she fell,” Joey said. “Do you have any medicine down here?”

“We can take her to the infirmary and see what we have,” Edith replied.

Nora thought that the pain was beginning to subside when a loud *bing bong* came from directly above her. The pain doubled in intensity.

“Mama has an announcement,” said an excited voice that Nora couldn’t make out.

“Hello, children,” said Gran Gran’s disembodied voice. “I’m sure by now all of you have met a few new faces.” Some of the children cheered in response.

“I love Iris Madison,” said a voice. Nora wasn’t sure who was talking. All of the noises started to blend together.

“Mama can’t hear you, Tabitha,” said another voice.

“I hope that you have all been very nice to them,” Gran Gran said, her voice sounding as sincere and sweet as your stereotypical grandma, “because they aren’t just guests, they’re your new sisters and brother.” Cheering erupted from some of the children. “Now, I don’t know what all you have told them or what they have told you, but please try to go easy on them. They have lived outside all of their lives and don’t understand the world the way you all do. I imagine they might be a bit scared, but they’ll come around eventually. I have something to deal with on the surface, but don’t worry, your mother knows how to deal with people who want to hurt her babies.”

If Nora’s head wasn’t already about to explode, she probably would have started beating it against the wall. Iris and Joey were saying something, but Nora was losing the ability to focus on words. She was seeing double of everything. Double Iris, double Joey, double kids, double

table, it was becoming a bit too redundant for Nora's liking. Luckily, for her, she remembered how to stop seeing double, so she closed her eyes and collapsed to the floor.

Critical Essay

Choosing Shifting Point of View:

When first deciding how I would like to approach writing a novel (something that I had never attempted before writing these initial four chapters of my thesis), the first question to enter my mind was: “who should the protagonist be?” Prior to thinking of any critical plot ideas, some greater symbolic meaning behind the work, or anything else, I immediately started thinking about the character that would be the driving force for the narrative. Despite this being my initial concern, it was a question that I found myself failing to answer over and over again.

The initial draft of this novel has only been read by one person other than myself. It was only a single chapter, and it featured none of the same characters that the current rendition features. It also had an entirely different plot. The feedback I received from the individual that read this draft was mostly positive. Despite this, the fact that the individual is a close friend of mine and was likely just trying to spare my feelings resulted in me doubting how satisfactory the writing actually was. Upon rereading my own work a number of times, I found it to be a blight upon human eyes. The primary fault that this initial rendition was guilty of was a terribly forced and unnatural way of trying to over explain pre-existing character relationships. Similar to the current state of the novel, there was a character with a longtime best friend as well as a sibling that served as primary relationships in the story. In order to convince the reader that these people did, in fact, have these relationships and they weren't just things that I had decided to will into existence, I found myself over explaining everything to the point of writing what could only be described as a character biography trying to disguise itself as a story.

With this early failure, I turned my attention strictly to focusing on how the story should be told, or more specifically, how I should use narrative perspective to shape the work. Around this time, I had just finished the first novel in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series. Martin's novel employs the interesting practice of changing character perspectives every chapter. The first novel, *A Game of Thrones*, features nine unique point of view (POV) characters, and this number grows with each subsequent entry in the series. I found this concept to be extremely fascinating, as it allows for a novel to go wherever it needs to for the sake of telling the most compelling story possible. Martin's story takes place in a large fantasy world with some POV characters that do not even interact with each other for the entirety of the story. Despite this, Martin's impressive world building allows the reader to feel how interconnected these individuals are, despite the vast distance that often separates them. This approach to storytelling fascinated me. In my twenty-plus years as a reader, I had never read a novel where I was unable to determine a sole protagonist that was at the center of the book's plot. With this new possibility of the use of multiple POV characters, I decided to take my novel in the same direction, albeit with my own choice of setting and story direction.

This commitment to multiple POV characters bears its own set of challenges. To quote George R. R. Martin on his use of characters, he says that he, "tr[ies] to resist having POV characters who are just a pair of eyes." (Martin 1:00). This is advice that I have remained conscious of as I chose each character on a chapter by chapter basis. The first question I asked myself when thinking of an individual chapter's story arc was: "Why is this character the best fit for the POV?" This was a fun question, because it allowed me to imagine multiple scenarios for the chapters that I was writing based on which character's thoughts would be present in the narration. For the introductory chapter, I decided to make Nora the POV character for a number

of reasons. The first, and most important reason was her connection to the second chapter's POV character, Joey. The brother and sister dynamic between Nora and Joey is one that I plan on exploring more deeply in later chapters, but, at the beginning of the novel, their relationship is really a springboard for the story to focus more on what is happening in the moment by relying on a simple sibling relationship to serve as the driving force for a character's actions. Of course, another POV character is also present in the introductory chapter, Iris Madison. The story certainly could also function if she were the POV character of choice for the first chapter. However, she was not the ideal choice due to how she is characterized through Nora's eyes. In showing the reader how Nora views Iris Madison before the reader gets to hear Iris Madison's thoughts, I hope to plant the idea of Iris Madison coming off as a bit of a ditzy and borderline comic relief character. This makes future chapters, where Iris Madison is the POV character, much easier to set up, as the reader already has an idea of what to expect from her. In doing this, I hope to provide some surprises later on in the novel as to the true nature of Iris Madison's character.

One challenge that I have found in chapters with shifting character POV's is making sure that every character is equally as interesting. This challenge is, as far as I can tell, impossible to overcome. I imagine that readers will have differing opinions on which character's chapters are preferable based on their own unique tastes, and this is intended (at least to some degree). In choosing to write a story without a single main character, there comes the opportunity for a very mixed reception from readers. While all of the POV characters have their unique traits that are meant to make them less than perfect people, they are written with the intention that some readers will connect with them more than the others. In doing this, the reader is essentially able to select who the protagonist of the story is based upon their preferences. To back this up, I

intended to split the chapters equally between the four primary POV characters (Nora, Joey, Iris Madison, and Alex). This is why I chose to have two of the main characters introduced in the first chapter, followed by the remaining two in the second chapter. Unfortunately, due to how the plot is currently planned to go, Alex's first POV chapter is not until chapter five.

The constant shift in point of view also lends itself to an interesting situation regarding chronology. When initially drafting what are now chapters two and three, I wrote them simultaneously, doing a few pages at a time before swapping to the other. This helped me better visualize the flow of time as these events unfold. Chapters two and three are completely separate from one another, and no matter which order they are read in, the actual plot of the story remains unaffected. The only thing that is implied through the chapters is that chapter two starts some time after the events of chapter one are already in motion. For all the reader knows, the events of chapter three could already be underway by the time chapter two begins, and that is the intended assumption once the readers has read all three initial chapters. I plan to use this ability to go back and forward in time with a shifting point of view to build more tension as the story goes on. The next chapter, which is not included in my thesis, will be from the perspective of Alex, who is snooping around Gran Gran's house from the moment he is left alone. This jump back in time at a later point in the novel allows for a few useful plot devices. The most important is the ability to have a POV character stay away from the underground environment and have a completely unique experience from the others. In this case, the reader knows something that the POV character does not (the other three POV characters are trapped and presumably in danger). This constant ability to create dramatic irony is useful to have, but is not something that I hope to avoid overplaying to the point of it becoming boring.

The “Point” of the Story:

The question of a story’s meaning is one that I personally am not very fond of. I subscribe to Wimsatt and Beardsley’s *Intentional Fallacy*, the belief that “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (Wimsatt & Beardsley 468). However, I imagine simply saying “the work means whatever you think it means” is hardly an acceptable answer. My own approach to writing often does not involve thinking about a greater message at the time of initial creation. Despite this, I certainly do have themes in mind as I construct the plot.

Given what is available to read now, the direction of the story most likely seems relatively vague. I have spent a rather sizable amount of pages setting up the situation that will take up the bulk of the novel. There are two main reasons for this. The first reason relates back to the shifting POV characters. I want each character to have a sort of introduction in their initial chapters so that the reader can get a feel for how their mind operates. I have found it to be quite difficult to write multiple people in the same novel who’s narrative thoughts sound completely unique, so I have tried to give them distinctive attributes when possible (such as Iris Madison’s full name only being said in narration in her POV chapters). The second reason for a long set up time is due to the nature of the story. It focuses on a rather unbelievable situation with unbelievable circumstances (children living in a fallout shelter). With that, I decided that there should be ample time dedicated to actually getting the characters into the situation and slowly associated with it in order to make it feel like it didn’t come completely out of nowhere. After these initial chapters, the story will focus on the relationship between the children and the POV characters that are trapped with them.

These characters are the driving force behind the narrative working as I have intended. Yet, despite characters often being the primary reason for a reader's enjoyment of a novel, the concept behind focusing on the study of fictional characters and their effects on people seems to be brushed under the rug in favor of discussions of theme. "Common readerly practices such as liking and hating characters, connecting with or distrusting characters, have been relegated to the book group or the blog, if they are discussed at all" (Keen 295). I feel as though this is a misstep in terms of fully grasping what makes a story enjoyable. Yes, there must be a plot that drives characters to do things, but these characters have to be people that are worth watching doing something.

A key decision that I have made for my novel is that the POV characters are meant to give the reader a completely reliable narrator at all times. The thoughts of the POV character of any given chapter are blatantly spelled out on the page for the reader to see. This is in an attempt to more deeply connect the reader with all of the characters in the novel. I think of an iconic line from *To Kill a Mockingbird* that I am taking quite literally in my approach to writing. Atticus Finch says, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... Until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." (Lee 39). Interestingly enough, the story of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not told from Atticus' (arguably the most iconic character) point of view. While I am not tackling a topic remotely close to the magnitude of Harper Lee's novel, I have chosen to take the concept of considering the points of views of characters by making readers actually see their points of view. This will lead to a particularly interesting turn in the novel when Gran Gran, the presumed antagonist of the novel, is given a POV chapter.

For the sake of my story, the POV characters will primarily be concerned with trying to get out of the bunker, but each one will also have their own unique problems/goals as well. Nora

will be dealing with a head injury which will inhibit her judgment and movement, Joey will be desperate to record footage for his followers, and Iris Madison will form a close relationship with some of the children. With all of these unique outlooks on the scenario, the main concept, at the very surface level of the novel, is essentially playing into the whole shifting protagonist idea even further. No two people experience something in the same way. They all have their own story to tell, and by telling all of the stories, the reader can then choose who is “correct.” I use the term “correct” because I also want this novel to raise hard to answer questions on the topic of what is right and wrong. At the beginning, Gran Gran is meant to be a clear villain to the reader. She has put children in her basement and is telling them impossible stories to validate her actions. However, as the story unfolds, Gran Gran is meant to look less like a clear cut villain and more of a morally gray character. The character Edith (oldest child of the bunch) will serve as a tool to demonstrate this shift. As the oldest child, she will be shown to have had doubts in the stories she has been told about a war keeping them from returning to the surface. However, she has come to the decision that it is best for her to live underground regardless of what the truth is because she has come to love the family that she knows underground and she sees no reason to question the good life she has. This will be a topic that I plan on having lingering throughout the novel: “Is it okay to avoid seeking the truth if you are comfortable living a lie?”

Above all, the point of the novel is for it to be interesting to read. That is why there is more planned conflict in the later chapters that will up the stakes for the characters. As of now, the level of concern is relatively low. However, there have been a couple instances of foreshadowing of an unknown individual receiving a “punishment.” This character will be revealed within roughly the next forty pages and will serve as a way to demonstrate the stakes and urgent nature of the character’s situation. To explain briefly, there is a character who has

been locked away for trying to escape the bunker through an old exit. This will throw Edith's willingness to stay underground into question by the POV characters as they see what happens to people who do not accept their life underground.

Another key plotpoint of the novel will be for the reader to try and uncover why exactly Gran Gran has these children underground (I would not call this a mystery novel, though). I plan on leaving hints in every chapter as a means to lead the reader to the answer prior to an explicit reveal, but that reveal will come prior to the end of the story. I do not want the question of "why?" to be lingering in readers' heads, so bits of explanation will be dropped to try and avoid frustration from a believability standpoint.

Setting Inspiration:

A flurry of different media that I have consumed have helped in my conjuring of these chapters. Other than George R.R. Martin's work, one of the most prominent ones, would be William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. A classic novel that nearly every American child is forced to read at some point during their secondary education (which is odd given the content), undoubtedly has a similar plot device to my work. Stranded children is a concept that is quite fascinating. However, instead of these children being alone on an island, they have an elderly woman who has kidnapped them and takes care of them. The connections run a bit deeper than simply a similar scenario, as I plan on exploring how children react to certain existential questions when taken away from a traditional family system. Interestingly enough, *Lord of the Flies* does have quite a few ties to nuclear warfare and my novel uses a fallout shelter as its setting. Despite this, my work is far less allegorical in nature in that regard.

As for the actual location chosen for the setting of my novel, I chose to loosely base it off of a real underground fallout shelter complex in South Dakota. A company actually rents out large fallout bunkers for people to use as they desire. Their website reads: “This irreplaceable, former U.S. Army base, consisting of 575 private military-built, concrete and steel, all-risk bunkers, is now repurposed and affordably priced, ready to provide life-saving shelter for your entire family or group.” (Vivos). All of the information and imagery on their website creates a nice feeling of imminent mass extinction, and that lead me to want to write about the location. Obviously, what I have described in the novel so far is not completely faithful to the actual design of the bunkers, but I do plan on including exposition to fill readers in on the strange state of the children’s underground home. The fact that they are actually in an old army base will also be used to create some important tension later on.

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