

A Higher Power

That following Sunday, the bells heralded in a new era of tradition. Some might say that it was poetic for it to happen on the seventh day, but I don't know. That just seemed a bit weird. Angela May, who had stepped in after the last Prime Minister resigned, walked calmly to the podium and begun her address. Official looking people had come round with megaphones, telling everyone the news and herding us towards a faded screen in the rather pitiful park. We all stood packed together like sardines watching Ms May talking. We wouldn't have sat down anyways. The park absorbed many of the chemicals in the surrounding area. It was taking a while and no one seemed to know what was going on. Someone figured the official looking people were a new group the Prime Minister had put in. My brother wouldn't stop making jokes about comparing them to the Illuminati.

She was talking about making changes, and saying things about moving off the path of ruin towards the light, and how the change would bring victory but it would be hard and we needed to accept that if we wanted victory. Jack wiggled an eyebrow at me and made a triangle with his fingers. But even he would admit that it was better than how things were now. She talked about prosperity and peace, and that sounded good. She talked about letting go of our conservative nature and for once embracing change with open hearts. Humanity was capable of great evil, but if we listened to reason rather than to the prejudice in our minds, we could prosper. We could give in to our vices, like greed, gluttony and sloth which fuelled our environmental destruction and the inequity between classes or we could step into the light and use our virtue to live simply and work together instead of fighting one another. No more wars, no more conflict, no more hurt. I thought about how grimy and bleak everything always seemed now, about our dog-eat-dog lives and constantly looking for a job to try and scrape by, and honestly, light and prosperity sounded good.

Some of the crowd was getting antsy. We'd been standing for a while now, at least half an hour, and it was getting hot. I shifted my weight over to my other foot and kept watching. Sometimes when the Prime Minister smiled, she looked disconcertingly like a smug reptile. There was something so

uncanny about seeing the Prime Minister look so self-satisfied. Though of course, some people just didn't turn out well on camera. There was a woman standing next Prime Minister May, perhaps the Vice Prime Minister. She was wearing a very prim outfit, the kind I imagined I'd imagined I'd wear to my office job as a kid. Now I couldn't believe that kind of suit still existed. I looked at my brother, who was watching the screen with a slight frown.

"Who's that? Like, next to her, I mean."

Jack looked where I was looking. "I don't know. She's like a director or something."

Prime Minister May kept talking about what the future would be like. First we'd build a stable society and focus on food production, utilities and collective needs. Then we would implement a new education system and let the young people, who had not had access to education for 2 years now, learn and lead us to a brighter future. It would be hard work, but together we could build a better world. But only if we opened our hearts to change.

Prime Minister May finished her speech and the screen switched off. The park was filled with the sound of shuffling and talking, and a whisper of murmuring muffled by the dry grass and plants. I could hear their worry at the thought of change. They were probably worried about being relocated to the industrial area or further water restrictions. Jack took my hand so we wouldn't get lost and we made our way home through the winding alleys and tall skyscrapers. There weren't many cars around, with the scarcity of petrol and all, but the main roads still stunk worse than the back alleys. Sure they were mouldier, and there was rotting garbage and human waste, but the skyscrapers kind of blocked out the smog that clung to the roads like a plague. It's not like we were in danger of getting mugged either. Unless the organ trade got *really* good .

We ran into Miffy on the way. She hadn't really listened to the speech but said the Prime Minister looked pretty enough. Jack still seemed iffy about her.

"People don't always want the best for us, Miffy."

I gave him a look. Miffy was too young for Jack to make her old and jaded.

“Don’t listen to him Miffy, he’s such a CT.”

“Huh? What do you mean he’s a CT.”

“He’s a conspiracy theorist. He thinks that the Prime Minister is part of the Illuminati and that they’re stealing our water!”

Jack grinned. “Well when’s the last time you saw a pool, hey Louise?”

I shrugged. Jack kept talking and looked around him as he walked.

“I’m not really talking about the government anyway. The Prime Minister’s probably fine. I just want you two to think about what other people want with you before you listen to them.”

After making sure that Miffy’s had gone home alright, we kept walking to our place. We were on the third floor and we had to go up these metal stairs on the outside of the block. Sometimes I would touch the oily dust on the bricks as I walked up and watch my fingers leave a stark mark in the grime. Jack liked to sit on the edge of the landing with his friends and swing his feet look down at the alley below. I did it once, but I was afraid I’d lose a shoe or fall through.

Jack tapped on the door, saying “Mum, it’s us.” We heard shuffling and the door creaked open. Mum ushered us in and we took our shoes off. We sat at the table in the dim light to eat our dinner of crackers and margarine, soy-and-meat sausage and carrot. Mum started to chop the soy-and-meat sausage and two carrots into slices.

“I like this new Prime Minister,” she said. “The other one was all waffley and too scared to do anything. This one, Angela Make or whatever’s got a strong hand. She’ll actually deal with the food and water problem and make those homeless people and dole-bludgers useful!”

“Mum,” I started carefully, “I don’t think anyone is homeless or unemployed because they want to be.”

Mum looked at me with a brilliant smile.

“No, they are, trust me. If you don’t work, the government gives you food, which I pay for, and I hardly get by any better myself. You two’ll understand when you start working and I don’t have to look after you.”

Jack gave me a look. “Mum,” he said, “You must be tired after work. How about you get some sleep?”

Mum nodded. “You know what Jack, I think I will.” Then she took her water and shuffled to her room.

We kept eating our dry tasteless food. Sometimes Jack would find something good to eat when he went out to work each day, or I’d get a bit when I went looking for errands to run, but we were rarely that lucky. I sighed.

“Mum’s getting a bit ridiculous.”

Jack scoffed. “She’s always been a bit like that. Don’t try reasoning with her. And plus, she’s not the one you should be worrying about. Miffy’s too young to get it, but I was serious before. Don’t say this to anyone, but you can’t just trust these people when they say they’re going to make changes and they’re going to be good. That’s what everyone says when they come into power. And I don’t like it.”

“Come on, what are they going to do? Why are you so worried?”

“They want control of us.”

That did sound bad, but I could think of worse things. Like a water shortage. Or an epidemic.

Jack sighed. “Look Louise. It doesn’t just matter that you live. You have to live for the right things.

And you can’t just trust people who seem good. Before school shut down, I learnt that everyone really like Hitler at first, but by the time they realised he wasn’t the guy he said he was, it was too late!”

“Prime Minister May isn’t Hitler! She’s much more trustworthy than that!”

“Yeah but you don’t know her. Just cos she looks nice doesn’t mean she is.”

“I guess.” I stood up and wiped the plate with a cloth and packed it away.

It was getting dark now, so we took our sheet off the window, where it kept the sun out during the day, and put it on our mattress in the living room. Then we lay down and waited for sleep in the summer heat.

“Look, just promise me that you won’t just trust what people say.”

“Sure.”

The next day was rather uneventful considering all the talk about change. The official looking people came around, said that they were the Change Agency and gave us each a time to visit the city hall and told us to bring a piece of clothing we could give up for those less fortunate than ourselves. It was a little quieter though. To put it poetically, the calm before the storm, except without the storm.

My appointment was first. I was on Wednesday at 12pm sharp. Jack's and Mum's both had them later in the day. Since both Mum and Jack were working at the time, I just went by myself, carrying a shirt that I used to like but that was getting impractical because it was white and got dirty easily.

The city hall had changed. The grime has been polished off the floor, the metal railing had been given a lick of royal blue paint and Change Agency banners of the same colour now hung from floor to ceiling on both sides of the room. I walked to the reception where a prim lady sat at the desk.

"Hi, um, I'm here to drop off my piece of clothing. I'm Louise Lee."

The lady nodded. "Come right this way." I clutched my shirt and followed her down a marble hallway. We bumped into another one of the official looking people on our way. It was that woman from the speech who stood behind the Prime Minister. She looked unruffled with her slick ponytail and confident high-heeled walk.

"Louise Merrell, this is the Director of Change, Louisa Kraklen."

The woman smiled serenely. "It's nice to meet you Louise, it seems we share something in common."

I smiled. "Yeah, I mean sure."

"I'll take Louise to the depository now, Director."

"Wait a moment. Louise, you seem like a very smart girl. Did you enjoy school?" Her eyes were watching me with polite interest.

"Yeah," I said. "It was good."

The Director smiled that cool smile again and started to talk rather quietly, watching me with unreadable eyes. "I'd like to offer you an opportunity. We don't do this much, but there are a few

schools in the rural areas that you can attend immediately. There's farming involved, but I'd like to see someone like you become a leader of our people in the future."

I scratched my neck. "Yeah, I'd love to do something like that."

"Great," she said. Looking at me carefully, the Director murmured, "You'll have to leave now, and keep quiet about this. Can you do this for me Louise? I can't have everyone wanting to go there.

There isn't enough space, so if anyone asks, you are going because you are a good seamstress."

I nodded. The reception lady told the Director that we had to leave and we hurried down the hallway.

I could hear the click of her pumps echoing in my ears.

She put my shirt in the depository and lead me down another hallway which went out of the back of the building. There I was put in a car with a boy. Neither of us talked. I wondered what fate would await him. Maybe he would have to risk the wrath of the sea to catch the mercury ridden fish that supplemented a poor man's diet. It made me feel thankful that the Director thought I had potential.

The boy and I were dropped off at the train station and given tickets. I looked at his and noticed the line might be going to the coast. Maybe he *was* going to become a fish catcher. My ticket was for a different train. I waved at him and walked away as quickly as I could.

The train ride was long. The train wasn't start of the art, but it wasn't dilapidated beyond repair and it didn't smell as sour as it did outside. The air was quite clean. We spent about an hour in the city and passed through the city centre. It looked glamorous, all colourful with the Change Agency's royal blue and a classy matte grey that wouldn't dirty much because of the soot. And there were so many shiny cars, some royal blue. I'd never seen that many cars driving at once before. I wondered what the people in them were doing, what they did with their grand lives. Then the colours were gone and we were passing through one of the rougher boroughs. We were surrounded on all sides by a cage now, to stop any unwanted from raiding the train. I saw a dark spot flash by, and turned back and watched it recede. It was the shadow of a crouching man, watching the train and sniffing a square of black grime and sighing with the relief of getting your next hit. My brother had once said that when people

stopped thinking about the future and thought too much about the suffering in the present, they gave up completely. Towering skyscrapers closed in on us from all directions like giant beasts eyeing their prey with their empty stares. Some of them were empty. The city was overpopulated, but it was even more overdeveloped. Just as we were entering a tunnel, I caught a glimpse of a mob of royal blue surrounding a single hunched figure.

The suburbs were so tightly packed you could feel the urgent need to be as close to the city as possible. That was where everyone thought the jobs were, after all. If you really wanted a job, the industrial zone, not the city, was your best bet. Of course, even the poor and homeless would rather beg on the streets of the city than choke to death on the soot in their lungs in the soy cracker factories. Most of the suburbs were well kept and tidy, but occasionally I saw a dead patch where the supply of resources had not been able to meet the demand and the better off had moved away while they still could. And that left the poor to get poorer. I saw a cinema that had been shut down being opened up again and painted over with royal blue by official looking people. A lot of people had gotten off the train by the time we'd gotten through the major suburbs. I felt sorry for the people who had to go from the outside of the suburbs to the other side of the city for work. It would be expensive and tiring.

Eventually, the suburbs started to thin out. Some of the apartments even had plots covered with glass. After a couple of tries, I managed to make out some of the plants I saw whizzing by. Peas, I hated peas, the ubiquitous carrot and tomatoes. Now those were rare.

As we went out even further, further than I'd ever been in my life, we started to see large patches of the ground in the space between country towns. It was mostly grey since it didn't rain much. But it was so strange to be able to see far and look at things in the distance without anything blocking your way. I got even closer to the window to get a better look. Some people got off at stops in the country, but it was mostly deserted so no one got on. My stop was the end of the line. I was left on the train with some other young people, some Jack's age, some a little younger, like me. They must have been going to the school as well. They did look like they might have potential.

We got off the train and looked around. Cracks and dried out weeds defined the platform. A lone green bench with half of its paint peeled off stood in the middle of it all. No one was waiting for us. So we stood around and waited. One of the guys was my age

“You going to the school?”

“Yeah. What do you think they’ll tell our families? About us going to this school, I mean.”

“Huh, I didn’t think of that. Maybe they said that we are going to a good school. I don’t know.”

“I hope they don’t. I’ve got a little sister and she’ll be devastated if I’m going and she isn’t.”

“Maybe they’ll tell them that we’ve become seamstresses or something. That’s what I got told to say.”

“Yeah, that could be it. Though I feel really sorry for the people who do have to become seamstresses and stuff if they actually make people do that. Good thing we are here then, huh?”

“Yeah.”

A truck came to the station and we piled into it. There was about thirty of us, and a bulky woman with thick arms driving.

“I’m Juanita, kids. I’m in charge now.”

Some of the kids said “Hi Juanita,” but most didn’t bother.

The trip was long and I thought that I was going to puke. There was dry grass as far as the eye could see and nothing much else besides scant trees. It was the kind of place you couldn’t run away from if you tried because there was nowhere to run *to*. By the time we got to the farm, it was dark and you could barely see past your hand. Juanita lead us from the front with a flashlight, but it did little to penetrate the darkness. I could make out a shadow, not the tall one of a skyscraper or flat, but a shorter one. A house, maybe a farmhouse. It didn’t seem big enough to hold us all.

As I stumbled and tripped my way to the farmhouse with the others, my suspicions were confirmed. Juanita stopped. “Alright, we don’t have space for you right now, so you’ll have to squeeze into the

house. Tomorrow you'll set up tents till you get more permanent accomodation. Take your shoes off so you don't track dirt everywhere."

We ate a paltry supper of soy crackers and dried peas before getting ready to sleep. About five of the kids piled into the guest room, including the boy I talked to before. I was in the living room with the others. We barely fit and it was cramped, but they were going to build us somewhere to live soon, so it would be alright.

When we were woken up it was still dark and cool. We were given a thin gruel with bits of corn in the dingy living room by a man called Hank. He said that we would be farming his land for the good of the country. We would study after we'd completed the work for the day. Today, we'd harvest the wheat.

There was miles of the stuff. It wasn't the golden colour I'd imagined. Instead it was rather faded and dry. There were no bugs in it that I could see, and no birds to speak of that might eat the seed. I got a proper look at the farmhouse as we left too. It was wattle and daub, made with the thin spindly wood I'd seen growing here and there in the fields. Looking at it, I was surprised it hadn't collapsed overnight.

Hank handed out sickles to half of us and twine to the other. I worked with one of the girls, grasping a handful of wheat and working through it with the sickle before giving it to her to tie up. I'd thought they might have a machine to do this, but petrol was expensive and machines were hard to come by. By midday the sun was getting really hot on my skin, and my back hurt from sickling the wheat. It didn't seem like we were slowing down, so I asked the girl if we could swap for a while. She nodded and handed me the twine, I gave her the sickle. Neither of us felt like talking. Bundling up the wheat wasn't much more fun than sickling it, especially since my hands were raw from touching the wheat. The twine made my hands more tender, and my skin prickled.

Hank handed out this rock-hard rye bread and passed around flasks of water. I tore the bread to pieces with my fingers and soaked it in my water to eat it. It would taste better with a bit of margarine, but at least it wasn't soy crackers. After I'd finished eating I just sat there for a bit, until Hank gave me a dirty look. So I kept picking the wheat off of the ground and bundling it up.

By the time it reached dusk, we had harvested a fair amount of wheat between us. Hank congratulated us on a job well done. It made me a little proud to see the stubble and shocks of wheat we had left we had left in our wake. We trudged back to the farmhouse with aching bodies and set up our tents as quickly as we could. The tent I made with the girl was so shoddily done I suspected it would collapse on us as we slept. Then we went into the house and soy crackers with soy-and-meat sausages and the dried peas again. Juanita said that those who wanted to learn could go into the study and she would teach us. Only a handful of us went. The rest were too tired.

There was only one table in the study. There was a shelf with books on it, a pile of books on the floor, a cup of pencils and a blackboard. It wasn't much, but it was better than not going to school.

Juanita taught us grammar. She said that it was important that we learnt grammar, or we would never understand or appreciate our language. She pulled examples from the text book she had and from Prime Minister May's speech. The basics like verbs, nouns and adjectives were things we should know, though she refreshed us on those anyways. In the phrase 'Open your hearts to change', 'open' was a verb and we would learn what kind of verb it was, 'your' was a possessive pronoun, 'hearts' was the direct object, 'change' was the indirect object and 'to' was a particle. The most important part was knowing the different types of verbs, the types of adverbs and the parts of a sentence.

Grammar was a skill that had been overlooked, but it was essential.

Auxiliary verbs determined the tense of another verb. Lexical verbs conveyed meaning. Dynamic verbs indicated an action, process or sensation. Static verbs described a state or situation. Finite verbs expressed tense. Non-finite verbs did not express tense. Transitive verbs were followed by a direct

object. Intransitive verbs were not followed by a direct object. Adverbs weren't just words that ended in 'ly'. They could describe all aspects of a verb. They described the manner, place, time and frequency. Tomorrow morning was an adverbial phrase.

Clauses have a subject and a verb. Main clauses have a subject and verb. Subordinate clauses are incomplete and have a conjunction. Relative clauses are incomplete and have relative pronoun. She put an example of each in a sentence up on a blackboard as she talked. She expected us to have learnt this by the end of this week.

All this bored me and I knew that Juanita would be too engrossed by grammar to see me yawn. I couldn't understand why this mattered, even though she kept iterating that it did. I put my hand up when she asked and tried not to fall asleep. It would make a good impression. But I was tired and I didn't know what she was saying. I could barely keep my eyes open in that poorly lit room and everything ached, especially my hands and back. When we were sent off to go to our tents, I felt relieved.

The next day was the same as before but more tiring. We were even less talkative and worked slower without the enthusiasm of a first day. We wouldn't finish harvesting the wheat for a while, no matter how hard we tried. It was going to be a slow slog to the finish. Hank cut a border through the wheat and said we would only finish once we were done with it. We barely finished on time. The only thing I could think about the whole day was how dry it was. I hadn't seen rain in the city for years now, but somehow I'd figured it would be different in the country. But there were no bugs and no birds as if they couldn't survive on the parched land, and the wheat barely need to be dried. All our water came from a deep borehole and it needed to be pumped. It was a surprise the wheat grew. The government would never steal the water, but there had to be a reason why we never had any.

We all looked dry. You could see from our papery skin, dead hair, even our eyes that none of us had ever had more than enough water to drink. Everything we ate was dry. Crackers, soy-and-meat sausages, carrots, peas, corn, radishes all dry, dry, dry. Gruel wasn't as dry but it clung to your throat.

When we got back we had more gruel for dinner. There were two more students in class today, making eight. Juanita taught us more grammar. I wanted to learn something useful like politics, or economics, or agriculture even. Though Juanita said that she would be testing us weekly on what we'd learnt, so I could prove that I was worthy of being here and worthy of leading in the future. So I paid attention to grammar. We revised what we learnt yesterday and Juanita taught us about the difference between particles and articles. Then she handed out notebooks and told everyone to write down what they had learnt. My handwriting, which I used to pride myself on, was now awkward. But I had plenty of time to improve it and was determined to excel in all ways possible and throw myself into my academics. I would make my country proud. That night I slept like a stone.

Over the next few days, we mastered harvesting the wheat. We became adept at it and Hank pushed us harder, saying that the more effort we put in, the more we could help the poor and the country. He supported us, pushed us, critiqued and praised. He said I had quick fingers and hands, but the only way I could get stronger was by working harder to harvest more wheat. I would become worthy of my country one day. We finished one day ahead of schedule, and we were so proud. As a reward, we would get to thresh and that would be much more fun than harvesting.

We threshed the seed by flailing it with the two brooms, rubbing it with our hands, stamping on it with our feet. We had left them to dry so they came easily. It was light work compared to what we had been doing before and it felt good to look at the pale harvested wheat fields against the stark sky. Faded blue and faded gold. The clear air and vision of a bright future made me feel like I was a changed person. That night we had the grammar test. I got one off full marks. I did really well, but Juanita told me that if I really focused and worked harder, I could do better. I could discipline my mind and soul.

The next morning we got up early like usual and started to winnow the wheat. The winds probably wouldn't pick up, so Hank gave us fans to winnow the wheat with. We had four groups, each with a production line going where some of the bigger guys would lift a big metal bucket half full of grain and chaff into the air and pour it into another bucket, while some of the girls would wave the fans to blow the chaff away. Then we would pour the winnowed wheat back into the bucket to blow away any remaining chaff and pick out rocks before bagging the wheat. It wasn't incredibly difficult or tiring, but it required concentration and we barely talked. It wasn't like there was much to talk about anyways. Nobody really liked to talk about how things were before. It was too depressing and ugly and we'd all seen it. And we were all here together and we worked and studied in preparation for what the future held, so it wasn't worth talking about either.

That night, after a supper of pea and wheat gruel, Juanita started to teach creative writing since we had all done well in grammar. She asked us each to write a creative passage about how being at the farm made us feel. I wrote about the wheat, and how impressed I was to see such a big open space filled full of growing food, but how it wasn't the colour I expected it to be. I thought it would look more vibrant and alive. It looked a bit dead and wilted. The farm was so different to the claustrophobic city I had grown up with and the air felt cleaner. I wanted to mention my brother and how I kind of missed him but I felt like Juanita wouldn't understand, so I wrote about the hopes I had for the future. I wanted prosperity and peace, and I wanted us to have the light and all the great things Prime Minister May had told us we could have. It felt good to know how I could contribute to that future, and doing well on my grammar test and harvesting the wheat gave me a sense of pride scraping by never had.

There were less of us there tonight, only four, so Juanita came around to each of us to help us improve our writing.

The other three were still struggling along. Creative writing had always been my strong point in school, and even though I hadn't picked up a book for years, let alone gone to school, I was still outpacing the others, even though I was trying to make my handwriting perfect. I waited patiently as Juanita worked with the timid young girl beside me for her to inspect my work.

"Cory, here you said that you were excited. I want you to add in an extra bit about how you felt physically to really make the story come to life. Maybe you felt more energetic because you were coming to a new place, or maybe your heart was beating faster as you anticipated a great future. Add in a detail ok?" She continued to tick things on Cory's paper.

"And here. 'Nice' isn't a very strong word and it isn't very descriptive. If you think that the food was 'nice', that's like saying that it's just alright, and I know that we feed you very well here. The food the government provides us is of a very high standard, so you can describe the food as 'delicious' or 'scrumptious' or 'mouthwatering' but please don't describe it as 'nice'. It would be very offensive." Cory lowered her eyes and nodded her head.

"Oh Cory, do you miss you big brother? Cory, you mustn't think like that. Your life is here now, and you have to focus on what you are doing for the good of your country. He will be doing the same, you just have different roles to play. You'll both be working together to make the country better, and you'll have a shared vision and goal, just different roles. Cory, you mustn't let his memory hold you back. All young girls have to grow up to not rely on their family all the time. I'd hate for you to be a bad girl who can't accept change with all her heart."

"Ok," she whispered. I could see her hunched over her book, worrying at her fingers as Juanita went to check on one of the boys. I felt glad I hadn't mentioned my brother. Poor Cory looked like she was about to cry. She looked at me and I offered her a soft smile.

When Juanita came to look at my work, she looked like she was ready to push my as far as I could go. She smiled as she ticked my descriptions of the never-ending fields of wheat and the vast sky. Then she turned to look at me, serious now.

“Louise, there is nothing wrong with our wheat. Wheat is supposed to be that colour! It’s been that colour for years! It’s not dead or wilted, it is the sustenance that keeps our country going and we are very privileged to grow it. Don’t belittle the plant which we work so hard to harvest, that means so much to our country! Do you understand?”

I looked at Juanita’s eyes carefully. She was actually getting upset about what I thought about the colour of the wheat. It was odd, but she was a farmer and wheat was her living. She looked at me expectantly.

“Ok Juanita, I understand that the wheat is important and that there is nothing wrong with its colour.”

“Good,” she asserted. “It’s important for you to remember that. Make sure you don’t think too hard about things. You’re one of those overthinkers, I can tell. I do like your writing, but try to vary your sentence length, use the clauses I’ve taught you about, and try to use more adverbs. It’s good that you care so much about your country. I think if you work hard, you can drive the country to even greater heights.”

I smiled.

While Juanita worked with the last boy, I thought about how bright my future, our future would be, and about putting more enthusiasm and energy I would put into my work, because every little thing could make a big difference. I would make a difference and I would work harder. With those peaceful thoughts filling my head, I went to my tent and fell into dreamless sleep.

The next morning, we started the arduous process of carrying the wheat to the main road. We could wheel it down the small track which went through the farm onto the main road, but we would have to collect the sacks of wheat from the fields and get them onto the track since the wagon wasn't all that great. Some of the boys would carry a sack by themselves on their shoulders, but most of us shuffled along awkwardly carrying it with a partner. I saw the young girl, Cory stumble and fall. It was a good thing the wheat sacks were sewn up so well, or the thing would have split. It took us two days of sweat work and parched throats to get the wheat to the side of the road and loaded in the truck, but it was worth it for the feeling of pride when Juanita praised us for our efforts and hugged us all before driving off to give the food to the government. That night she came back with soy crackers, dried peas, millet, corn and carrots. She cooked some millet with water, corn and dried peas, and broke soy crackers into the mix. The food tasted even better that night since we knew that it was paid for by our labour.

I passed the next few months peacefully at the farm. I had gotten thinner than I was in the city, but I was sturdier and stronger. Since we grew food, we ate more fresh food than city dwellers, even though most of what we grew didn't touch our lips. I was no longer a useless city girl. I could work hard, I worked well and I knew things about the farm. I knew that we needed to compost in autumn before we planted corn, that the chickens were precious and were to be fed the best food, never soy crackers, and given water so that they would lay and that all our waste was to be composted along with the food scraps and chicken poo. I focused even more on my studies too. I had learnt about grammar, creative writing, the history of our country, geography, mathematics, chemistry and physics and I was nearly always top of the class. One of the boys would occasionally beat me, but I was always willing to work harder to beat him. Since we rarely talked on the farm, I would spend every spare moment thinking about what I had learnt, turning it over and studying it from different angles and thinking of questions to ask Juanita so I could master it completely.

Sometimes Juanita would tell us about the great things the government was doing. They were the best government we had had in years and they brought more stability than any other government had. They

had control over the resources and the people, and this let them make sure that human vices like greed and sloth didn't cause our destruction. While all jobs were necessary and serving our country was an honour, she reminded me that we were lucky since we were only farming and we were still getting an education in such austerity. Some people had to work longer, harder shifts in the soy cracker factories or in coal mines. Less people lived in the cities now, more were given greater opportunities to better themselves and their country, and the unemployed and homeless were asked to consider their choices and play an active role in society. She also mentioned that the Prime Minister May, whose hard work had drained her, had been replaced temporarily by the Director of Change who was more fit to govern.

By the next year we had grown squash, built two cabins to live in from the wood in the area, and expanded our wheat fields outwards by using abandoned fields. Although Juanita discouraged talking when we worked, which was most of the time, I had become somewhat friends with Cory, and the boy I competed with in class. His name was Matthew. We were all adroit farmers now, but the Wheat Harvest this year took just as long as the last, by virtue of the extra fields we had sown. We sickled with aching backs, twined with tender fingers and thought of our contribution to the food crisis and the gratitude we felt for finally being able to do something. Then we threshed with our hands, feet and brooms and winnowed the chaff from the grain with fans since the winds rarely picked up here anymore.

There was much more grain this year, almost double of last year, so we had to move it quickly if it were to deliver it on time. We all carried a sack each at a time on our backs, which was heavy and tiring and made my back ache. The strongest boy pushed the wagon, piled high with the sacks of wheat, down the track to where our truck was waiting on the road, the muscles in his back rippling like in those of an ox. When I went back to the fields to get another wheat sack, I saw Cory lift a sack of wheat onto her back and tremble before collapsing. I ran over to her and saw that she was crying. She looked so small and timid with her thin arms and fragile nature. Almost bird-like. She said that there was something wrong with her back and it hurt to move and that she was scared now. I told her

there was nothing to be scared of and went to get Juanita. She would fix this. When I got Juanita, she told me to go back to moving the wheat and to let her deal with it.

Once we had loaded all the wheat into the truck, Juanita scooped Cory up and put her in the seat next to her. She drove off and we went inside to wait. When Juanita came back much later in the night, she wasn't carrying Cory. For a moment, I thought she had died. Juanita said that Cory was staying at the best hospital, but that she would not return to be with us, but would look after the elderly in the city since it better suited her nature. Later, I asked her if Cory would be alright.

"Louise," she said, "Why are you so hung up on Cory?"

"Well, I guess it's because I didn't get a chance to say goodbye to her."

"Louise you need to focus on yourself. Cory will be fine, the others will be fine. They are focused on their own roles, and you should focus on yours. Don't overthink things, OK? Just focus on studying your hardest and working your best"

"Yes, Juanita."

That night I couldn't help but overthink it as I lay in the girls cabin. The cot next to me was empty, and as I drifted off to sleep, I couldn't help but think that Juanita's eyes hadn't matched her smile when she talked to me.

A sudden flash of a canteen in an underground bunker with round smiles dripping with vitality gorging themselves on fresh food in the golden light. Then it went dark and it was only me and another with our gaunt faces, picking at bland off-pink mush with bony fingers wrapped by skin like parchment. Then it was just me, alone in the echoing canteen, looking at the off-pink mush in the dim light in horror and feeling the cold creeping in, and feeling the horror creeping in. When I woke up I was covered in cold sweat and scared to move. My chest was heaving with dread and my heart felt like it was going to give out. I couldn't stop thinking about the off-pink mush and what went in it, about the round smiles so bright and full that became faceless to feed the whittling few. And if that dream continued what would have happened. Would I become another faceless

bowl of mush served to no one in that canteen, or would I become thinner and thinner till I ceased to exist? The thought of being surrounded by such horror and being absolutely oblivious for so long was terrifying. I couldn't stop thinking about it.

It was so real.

It was more real than anything that had happened to me for many days. And it made me scared. I was afraid now, of what crept outside the walls of my cabin. I was scared that Juanita would have heard my startled breath and *knew*. But my fear wasn't unreasonable. I knew that even if the pink mush wasn't real, I was in that situation. They were using me and it would end badly. And I knew that Cory was never coming back.

Something had to change.

I mulled over all of this the next day. I couldn't look Juanita in the eye at breakfast, and I feared that my odd behaviour would draw attention to me. I felt relieved when we went out to the field to work with Hank. He was more gentle, like a big animal. Juanita was sharp, and she looked kind but as I thought about it I realised that her words were barbed and she was manipulative. My brother had told me to stay alert and question, but I had forgotten him and his words and thrown myself into my studies and farming, blinded by the praise of Juanita and the comfort of trusting authority. I suddenly felt like all the times she told me not to overthink she was trying to get me not think at all, and that opening our hearts to change just meant accepting whatever the government said was true. My life was great now, sure the hours were long and the food was as little as it was before, but I was part of a cause and I had a future to look forward too. But I still felt like there was something wrong with this picture and that sense of wrongness hung around me like a cloud for the next few weeks. I had been so oblivious.

I had a suspicion that Cory was dead. I deliberately brought her up around Juanita with the frequency of a lonely friend, and when she told me that I needed to move on and open my heart to change I felt that truth solidify in my heart. There was no way I was overthinking things. I wasn't thinking at all. I let my instincts drive me and I listened to my body. It complained that I was doing too much work for not enough food and no reward to speak of. I realised how hollow Juanita's smiles were and her words. I wondered if they really wanted us to be the leaders of the future and why nothing they taught us would help us with that important task. And I realised that maybe keeping us occupied with innocent subjects like grammar and maths was the point. I wondered if the Director really saw potential in me, or if all the others had been lured in with the exact same tactic. There was no way I could ask.

I tried to figure out the system. We had never been off of the farm, though leaving was not explicitly prohibited. It made me feel so caged now. I doubted Juanita would take kindly to me asking to leave the farm, but that cut me off from information. My options were now whatever Juanita said, which I didn't really trust, or Hank. I hung around Hank when we were working and would ask him quietly about how his life was and how his journeys to get our food were. He said that the government limited the variety so he couldn't get food that he liked like cucumber since they didn't think growing it was worth their time. He said that there were always shortages and he didn't like giving up all of his good grain to get cheap soy crackers in return.

"But can't we just keep it? It could be a secret."

"Naw, Juanita'd report me. She's one of them ya know? The government. The Change Agency." I shuddered. While I had lost my trust in Juanita, I had never considered that she could be part of the Change Agency. I couldn't believe they were watching us all the way out here in the country. I asked him if he thought other people had it harder than us.

"Sure. One of my friends who used to own the land we're standing on got sent away to bury garbage or incinerate it or whatever it is they do to it. He was a nice guy but he talked pretty loud

and he kept going into town and mouthing off about how Prime Minister May actually did a military take over or something. He's probably got ash in his lungs now."

I nodded sympathetically.

"There's also the water restrictions for the people in the city. We don't have them out here cos they can't stop us from using the water underground and we need to grow crops."

I figured the government probably was doing everything out of the collective interest of the people. Resources were limited, but by managing them properly and distributing them equally, you could give the country its best shot at survival. Hank had said that growing cash crops like cotton and tobacco was illegal now, and only important food crops were grown. Even killing people like Cory was justifiable in a way. She had gotten injured and she wasn't a good farmer. Maybe they'd decided she wasn't worth the resources. I wondered if the nursing home they said they would send her to even existed, or if the elderly were expendable too.

Even our farm made sense. Get some of the smarter kids, mix them in with dumber peers and work them so hard they can't think and then teach them some harmless subject that won't make them criticise the system but tell them that it is important. They'll become focused on their studies and tiredness and forget the world around them. Like I did. I just couldn't believe it had taken me a dead friend to realise what was wrong. Even though, I still couldn't point a finger at anything specific. The wrongness was everywhere and nowhere. You couldn't find solid evidence of it, but you could feel it lurking the corners of your eyes unless you were too focused on other things like studying. Then it disappeared completely and everything looked fine.

The only cog in the machine that didn't make sense was the enigmatic Director. She was powerful and now she had replaced the Prime Minister, who was definitely not just tired. But she had been in my city shortly after the Change started, and she had personally greeted me. I still couldn't see her doing that to every young person at this farm. Her time was more precious than that. What did

she see in me? I didn't even know if she did see something in me. Maybe she had come around to tell me I was special exactly because she knew it would make me work so much harder.

The next few weeks were miserable for me. I was always nervous, unable to sleep, worried. I had so many question, so little answers and I couldn't help but think that maybe I was wrong. Maybe everything was fine and I was seeing things that weren't there. But I would catch glimpses of cracks in Juanita's facade, see how hard the others work and realise that children weren't supposed to live like that, watch Hank's face fall as Juanita served more soy crackers. As my misery reached the peak of its crescendo, I saw a black car with tinted windows pass the farm at dusk. And in that moment I knew.

After dinner I didn't attend the lesson, I told Juanita I was feeling to tired and told her I would catch up on the work tomorrow. I rested in my cot with my eyes closed and waited for the others to return. I fell asleep once, but woke up startled and afraid that I had missed my opportunity. Once they came back, I counted to a thousand and one, waiting for their breathing to even out as they fell asleep. I realised then that I didn't know when Juanita went to asleep, or if she slept at all. I had no plan either. I was going in blind.

There was a barrel of dry rye biscuits in the shed. I didn't turn the light on. It wasn't worth the risk. I grabbed as many as I could fit in my pocket, filled a flask with water from a bucket, drunk it and filled it up again. I didn't know where I was going, or what to so I grabbed an old wheat sack and filled it with more supplies. I shut the shed door carefully and crept across the farm with the wheat sack on my shoulder and the biscuits in my bag. When I hit the main road, I checked that the light were off in the farmhouse and ran.

I didn't know where the black car was going, but it wasn't going into town but rather further out. We were the end of the line, so whatever was out further was unknown to me. I ate one of the rye biscuits as I ran. Maybe I was giving too much significance to the black car, perhaps it was going

to survey and oil rig or going to another city. But it looked government like and out of place and it was my only lead. I was risking everything for it. It was too late to turn back now.

I ran until it was dawn with tired legs and burning lungs, looking for something, anything in the dark. A thin crack of light in the sky caught my attention as the sun grew brighter behind me. I squinted. It went from the ground up up into the sky. I couldn't see how far up it went. I ran towards it.

As I got closer, I realised it was a pole, no, a metal ladder. What I had seen was the light reflecting of it. I couldn't tell where it ended or what it went to. It just kept going up into the dark blue sky. The black car was parked near the base of the ladder, abandoned. I thought that I could drive it further into the country, but I realised that the road had stopped. The end of the line. I couldn't go to the city. There was nothing for me there, and even if I wasn't sent back to the farm I couldn't stand to live under this system, constantly doubting myself and what was true.

I put a hand on the ladder. I could feel steady faint vibrations echoing through it. There was someone on the ladder. I had a gulp of the water and another rye biscuit. Then I tied the sack around my waist and started climbing up. It wasn't bad at first. It was a little cold but I was strong from all the farming so it wasn't difficult. I wished that I had gloves. I was certain I was doing the right thing. It wasn't like I had any other options.

Soon I felt myself getting closer to the other person on the ladder. The vibrations were louder now. I could make out a black dot above me. At that moment I realised that I had gone too far up to be able to get back down. Every rung I went down increased my chance of slipping and falling to my death. I didn't look down, but looking around me I couldn't see the ground anymore, just dark blue sky. For the next few hours, the black dot slowly got bigger as I closed in on the other. The sky was icy blue now, not the colour you imagined it would be from the ground, but faded. I was convinced that if I somehow made my way back down, I wouldn't find myself where I came

from, but in a misty ice blue world, barren and alien. I didn't know how far I'd gone or how far there was to go. It wasn't like it mattered. I was tired and it was cold. Colder than it ever was on the city or on the farm. It was so cold it made me think of the pool I had swum in once as a child. It was deep, and I felt so small, so I had clung to a ladder not unlike this one for the fear of drowning. I was a poor swimmer since pools were so rare, and somehow that made me even more afraid now.

It was the Director. I could see her now, with her sleek ponytail ruffled by the climb. She wore practical climbing clothes and gloves. She was a good few metres in front of me.

"Hello, Louise," she yelled. There wasn't any wind so I could hear her clearly.

"What are you doing, Louisa? Where does this go?" As I said this, I realised I'd revealed my weakness.

"You're a smart girl Louise, figure it out. I'm the Director, by the way.."

She wasn't going to tell me. That was her power over me.

She was alone and had prepared to climb the ladder. "You're running away." Like I was. And where the ladder went didn't matter as much as what you were running away from.

I could hear her chuckle quietly. If I was any closer to her, I realised, she could kick me in the head with her foot, or I could drag her down around the ankles. She must have realised this because she sped up a little and increased the distance between us.

I wondered if this ladder even ended and where it lead. It would have to end. And then the Director and I could have the rest we badly needed. Then I realised that once we reached the top and she got off first, there was a chance that she would try to kill me.

There wasn't any deal I could make with her. I could bargain to not kill her in exchange of her not killing me, but once she got up off the ladder I would lose all power and she could do whatever she wanted, especially if she had friends up there. I'd have to find another option.

I realised I hardly knew anything about the Director, but I couldn't see any end to the ladder yet so I had time. So I started asking basic questions, probing for information.

"Look Director, I don't get it! What were you guys trying to change?"

"The greed of humanity was the express train to our destruction. The Change Agency has inverted that." Her voice was cool and even. She sounded like she was repeating a manifesto or something.

I would have to rouse emotion from her if I wanted to get anywhere.

"One of the girls, Cory, hurt her back and they sent her away. Did they kill her?" It was a gamble and it revealed more of my weaknesses but it was the only thing I had.

"Poor Louise. I'm sure you care a lot about that girl. Unfortunately, if she hurt her back she wouldn't be able to contribute to the future would she? So yes, its possible." She was still unruffled.

"How can you say that? Don't you care about family and friends? That's so wrong. Your whole system is so wrong."

"Well, I don't. Putting society first matters more than the select few and yes it is wrong, but being wrong doesn't mean that it is bad. Likewise, letting young people starve to death at the expense of the elderly is less wrong than killing the old, but it is more good. Do you see the distinction, Louise?" She sounded at most amused. But I could hear from the slight strain in her voice that family and friends were a sore point for the ruler of our country.

"I think," she said slowly, "That you've learnt enough about me for now. How about you ask the questions that are really bothering you, like if I chose you especially or if you were just another one of many. Would you like to know?"

"Yeah. I would."

She laughed. "Then I won't tell you."

“You hold your cards very close to your chest. At least I can admit when I want something. Why do you need control so badly?”

I'd touched a raw nerve. I could see it in the stiffness of her shoulders. I realised I had an advantage because I could gauge her reactions but she couldn't turn around and see mine.

“Alright, I do need control. I'll admit that much. It keeps you safe. But if you really think you don't need control too, tell me why you are asking me these questions. Say it out loud.”

“But control hasn't kept you safe. It has put you on this ladder.” I couldn't say it out loud, but I knew that if I wanted to find out more about her I would need to say it. But not saying it meant that she couldn't know for sure and maybe she would doubt herself the way I had.

“Yes, but that's because I lost control.” The Director faltered as she realised the chink she had exposed in her armour. “And besides, I know where this ladder goes. Maybe I'm comfortable with that and in control.”

“You aren't.”

“You haven't answered my question.” Her voice was cold. She had sped up. I leant back to check that we weren't approaching the top. It made me afraid that I would fall back and keep falling.

There was still ladder as far as I could see. “Say why you are asking me these questions out loud.”

I wouldn't admit that she had the advantage and could throw me off the ladder once she got off.

So instead I said, “Because I've been up here, and I want to know if you know what's up there. It amuses me.” I sped up so that I could almost reach her.

Her hand gripped the rung so tight her knuckles went white. “Alright, what's up there then?”

I hoped my words would kill her. I waited till her hand between bars to say “Nothing.”

She missed the bar. I wrapped my ankles and knees around the side of the ladder and pulled down at her with my hands. I almost threw her off but I got off balanced and she recovered.

I was back where I started.

She laughed, shaken. “Huh, not bad liar. Maybe you would have been a great leader in the future if I was actually offering you that honour. But I doubt you have any other tricks up your sleeve.”

I didn't. And if I was scared before, that was nothing compared to how I felt now. I felt so weak I thought I'd collapse and fall off the ladder.

"You can't know I'm lying. I live right next to it and you don't even know what is up there."

"If there was nothing and you saw it, you be dead now. There's no way down."

"But maybe I'm right anyways." Now that I thought about it, I didn't know that she was going to kill me anyways for sure. It made my murder attempt feel inappropriate. There was nothing much else I could do except find out more about the Director and tell her enough about me to keep me alive. And even then, we still didn't know what was at the top the ladder.

"You know, I've only gone swimming once."

"Water was scarce when I was young too. Ever since we centralised resources there hasn't been enough for everyone. It's always been like that, we just didn't feel it until resources were centralised because we were in one of the few water rich areas."

And here I am discussing water with the woman who could end my life or die with me. The heat is leeching out of my body and we are still climbing, climbing, climbing.