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Judging Laura

An Honors Program Project Presented to
the Honors Program of
James Madison University

by Rebecca E. Richardson

May 2015

Accepted by the faculty of the Honors Program, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program.

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Prologue

Laura Audax is a sixteen-year-old girl who has an interesting set of characteristics. She is a dynamic mixture of compassion, stubbornness, brilliance, recklessness, imagination, and arrogance. The way the world understands these personality traits has transformed and evolved over time. If a girl like Laura lived in four different time periods, society would react differently to her in each era, but the overall question is how different these reactions really are. Does the definition of what makes certain personality traits “good” or “bad” change over time?

The following four stories take place in 1850, 1920, 2015, and 2100 respectively, and each time, Laura is the central character. It is important to know that each rendition of Laura is totally separate from the others, and she had no recollection that she may have lived in a different time period. Laura’s personality is kept constant for the sake of each surrounding culture to evaluate and make judgements about her.

Jane is another recurring character in each of these short stories. She acts as the audience’s looking glass, and is a representation of how the people of each time period react to a girl like Laura. She too is unaware of being a part of the other stories in the other time periods; however, she is subconsciously linked to the learning experiences of her former selves. This link represents how individuals are able to learn from history, and grow in accordance to the experiences of their ancestors.

Lastly, Jane’s close friend is a representation of the voice of society. She is quick to offer Jane her opinions about Laura, which align with how the world in each era would view those traits. She is not written as the same person each time, because society’s ideals and values change each time. The voice of Jane’s friend, and other surrounding characters, guide Jane’s opinions on her journey of judging Laura.

1850: Stepping In

Mother quickened her pacing across the foyer floor when our grandfather clock chimed four times. Her gloved hands wrung the lace fan I had given to her as a birthday present two weeks ago.

“Mama, you’re going to ruin it,” I said, reaching out and placing my hand on hers. “It will be here soon, and everything will be fine.”

“Well this is what we get for not having a buggy of our own. If your father weren’t so stubborn...” Mother closed her eyes, and tapped the clock with her fan. “Oh Jane, this is testing my nerves.”

I heard the steady beat of hooves approaching, and I rushed to look out the window. I stumbled slightly over the ruffles in my petticoat and heard a soft tearing. My most treasured friend, Josephine, was coming out today, and I begged father to let me buy a new royal blue dress for the ball because blue is her favorite color. He finally gave in on the condition that I would not ask for one with a hooped skirt. I paused momentarily and waited for mother’s berating. I breathed a sigh of relief when it did not come, and looked out the window.

“It is the buggy, mother. I knew we would not be late,” I said, and I dashed to the front door.

“Jane, my goodness, you should wait for Tucker to get the door for you. What do you think we pay him for?” Mother glowered at me, and I feared she would launch into another lecture about my manners. Lucky for me, Tucker, our head butler, came from the hallway to get the door just as Mother opened her mouth.

The air was warmer today than it had been this past week, and I was glad to not need an overcoat. Mother took my arm for support as we made our way across our cobblestone walk to

the buggy waiting to take us to the ball. I saw two figures already sitting in the carriage, and assumed that these women were also attending the debutante ball.

The driver stepped off to help us get in, first Mother and then myself. I was seated across from another young girl, who was perhaps sixteen as well. She too was being escorted by her mother, who looked less than pleased to be sharing a cab. The girl had a handsome face and long, chocolate tresses that were artfully draped over one shoulder. Her hair seemed to melt into her gorgeous, golden gown, which looked as if it were made of the finest satin. Her corset must have been cinched so tight that I wondered how she could even breathe. At her waist, the dress flared out with ruffles and ribbons. It was the most beautiful gown I had ever seen, and she was clearly flaunting her fortune on her sleeve. Why she was sharing a buggy with two strangers when she could be riding in one of her own, was beyond me.

I felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment at my torn petticoat, and thought how destitute I must have looked to her. However, my envy was somewhat appeased when I saw that on top of her perfect curls, she donned the most atrocious hat in all of England. Feathers upon feathers covered what looked like a man's top hat, and the whole thing was wrapped in tulle. Quite frankly, I believe my seven-year-old sister could have fashioned a better hat than that. This girl must be quite bold to show up to a debutante ball with such a disaster on her head.

"I suppose we are all strangers, so there is no one to introduce us but ourselves." The girl flashed such a warm smile when she said this, that I hardly felt embarrassed by the situation.

"My name is Laura Audax."

"Jane Smith," I said, and I returned the smile as sweetly as I could. "Pleased to make your acquaintance." Blood rushed to my cheeks as I realized that Mother and Laura's mother were still sitting in the carriage in silence and had yet to be introduced. Laura and her mother

were clearly of higher status than Mother and I, and they must have thought I was so rude to not have introduced Mother before myself. “May I introduce Mrs. Smith, my mother, to you, Mrs. and Miss Audax?” I had panicked and it was as if my lips had lost complete control. I sounded like a fool.

Mrs. Audax lifted her nose and murmured, “Pleasure.”

Mother whipped her fan open with one hand and hid her crimson face. I was sure I would hear about this tonight, and probably be sent straight back to finishing school. I’d be lucky to be a debutante by the time I’m thirty.

Laura, however, seemed quite unphased by the uncomfortable atmosphere. “My night is sure to be full of introductions. I have explored little of this side of the city, so I thought it would be a grand idea to come out to a fresh set of faces. I love meeting new people, which is why I always insist on riding in a public cab.”

“You are going to be one of the debutantes tonight?” I asked. I glanced at Mother, who stared wide-eyed at Laura.

“Oh yes, and I am quite excited. I’ve been practicing my dancing for months now,” Laura said. “Are you to be presented as well?”

“No,” I said. “My dear friend Josephine is, but I am simply a guest this year. Perhaps next year...” I heard Mother sharply exhale and I thought better of saying anything else on the subject.

I pushed back the curtains to see if we drew near Earl Langdon’s estate, where the ball was to be hosted. I saw his plaza fountain in front of his grand entryway, but it was still just the size of a thimble. We would be in this buggy for quite a bit longer, and I silently begged that

Laura would not continue the conversation so the tension could dissipate. Alas, unnecessary prattle seems to be Miss Audax's forte.

Initially, she asked me questions like what occupies me during the day, but frankly I didn't care to elaborate upon myself and she didn't insist on it, either. Instead, she chose to focus the conversation upon herself and her many talents. She draws, she sings, she plays piano, she writes, and honestly, I didn't believe there is a single thing she couldn't do. It would have been acceptable to modestly mention that she is well versed in a few skills, but this was simply bragging.

Indeed, she knows skills, and naturally, those skills are coveted, but a mild mannered lady who shows a little humility is far more desirable than one who puts herself on a pedestal. For her sake, I sincerely hoped she knew how to hold her tongue in the company of a gentleman. Her wealth may be in her favor, but her arrogance certainly was not.

Our carriage drew near Earl Langdon's gate, and my heart leapt. Probably in attempt to distance itself as far from Laura as possible. The carriage slowed, and the footman came to help Mother step out. The facade of the estate was exquisite. The front stairs rose to meet granite pillars that melted into an arch over the hand carved, wooden, double doors. The windows with rounded tops were stacked one on top of the other until they disappeared into the sky. The walls looked as if they'd been scrubbed with bleach, for they practically sparkled from the light of the setting sun.

The footman led the four of us into the grand hallway, and the sight dazzled me. The outside of the estate paled in comparison to the inside. Shades of gold and white covered the walls, ceiling, chairs, and tables. The chandelier was suspended close to the ceiling, but trickled in three tiers towards the glossy floor. The gentlemen looked so dapper, and all the ladies looked

absolutely divine. It all looked like a vision from my dreams, but far grander and far more beautiful. This may not be a coming out ball at court, but everything looked so fantastically royal.

I found Josephine in an adjoining room chatting with a few other girls who were also about to be presented.

“Josephine, you look simply lovely!” I said, looking over her forest green dress. The lace that draped across her bodice and shoulders seemed so delicate compared to her swooping hoop skirt. I felt an envy bug bite me in the stomach, but she deserved to outshine me. This was her celebration, and the start of her first season.

“Oh Jane, is that you? I could hardly recognize you in your brand new gown!” Josephine said and pulled me into a hug.

“You won’t believe the carriage ride I had on the way,” I said. I dragged Josephine away from the other debutantes so we would not be overheard. “I met a Miss Laura Audax, who is also to be presented this evening.”

“I think I’ve heard the name Audax before. Is her father the owner of Halibridge Abbey?” Josephine said, eyes widening. Josephine, like any girl entering her season, was simply infatuated with wealth.

“Is that right? Perhaps, she did look quite wealthy,” I said and remembered her lavish golden gown. “That would explain...”

“Explain what?”

“Oh nothing. I couldn’t.”

“Jane, don’t be nonsensical,” Josephine said and tilted her ear toward me. “It’s only me you’re talking to.”

“All right,” I said. “It just explains why she was so boastful. And she really was quite talkative. I couldn’t get a word in even if I wanted to.”

Josephine giggled and blushed just as she always did when the two of us gossiped. We took a turn about the room and I told her everything from the awkward introduction to her ghastly hat.

“I wonder how many people saw that thing before she took it off,” I said, after I let one last snicker escape my lips.

The presentations of the ladies ensued, and one by one, they bowed before the crowd. Each girl looked stunning, and I knew that many gentlemen were about to fall in love that night, and some would leave with broken hearts. Josephine floated across the floor, and I’m certain I’d never seen anything so graceful. Laura had a different grace to her stride. Her nose pointed to the ceiling, and when she bowed, it was as if she were the queen herself. But, she looked so confident, I couldn’t help but watch her in awe.

Once the last girl had been presented, Earl Langdon’s son, Sebastian, a handsome fellow with a soft gaze, stepped forward to open the ball. He was heir to a great fortune, and a great estate, and naturally, most of the debutantes had their eyes on him. If I had been presented, I would certainly have been quite willing to get acquainted with him too, and not just for his wealth. He strode toward a pretty girl in a peach gown, but Laura decided she disagreed with his decision. She stepped out of her place into the open floor, smiling as if Sabastian had chosen her instead of the girl in peach.

A wave of gasps washed through the crowd. How impertinent could Miss Audax have been to steal the opening dance from a fellow debutant, especially with the most eligible bachelor at the ball? It was as if Laura has absolutely no regard for manners whatsoever. I

glanced to Laura's mother, who was hiding her face behind her fan. The poor woman must have been so embarrassed, especially since ladies like my own mother would be sure to make a point to blame her for Laura's behavior.

Sebastian tentatively bowed before Laura and took her hand to dance. He acted like a gentleman, probably to avoid a nasty scene, but the look on his face was one of utmost disgust. Laura didn't seem to notice, and if she did, she certainly didn't care. The smile on her face was wide, and it was clear she knew what she was doing. She might start off on the wrong foot, but I thought she wanted to be the girl all the suitors remember. Among irritability and rudeness, cleverness was another one of her many qualities.

Other couples hastened to join the two on the dance floor and the tension quickly dissipated. I am not fond of dancing, but I loved to watch gentlemen's nimble feet scuttle around to frame their twirling partner's dress.

"What an evening," Mother said from behind me. I turned and saw her face puckered as if she had taken a monstrous bite of lemon. "I imagine the Earl is simply furious his son had to dance with that girl."

"I think the situation was handled quite well. At least as well as such impropriety can be handled," I said, but I couldn't help but feel the same towards Earl Langdon as Mother.

Sebastian deserved a much more mannerly dancing partner.

"Sebastian Langdon is a noble man. Of course he handled it well," Mother said. "I was just talking to Laura's mother. That woman's poor nerves."

I wasn't sure if it was proper to ask Mother to elaborate on business that didn't concern me. Luckily, she was never one to keep a bit of information to herself.

“Apparently her daughter is quite the handful on her side of the city,” she continued. “It wasn’t Laura’s choice to come here at all. Lady Audax wanted her daughter to be presented to gentlemen who didn’t have knowledge of her poor reputation.”

“Poor reputation? I wonder what that could mean.”

“Don’t, child. You ought not get mixed up in scandals. You’re a lady,” Mother said, lightly tapping me on the arm with her hand fan. “But, if you must know, I heard from Mrs. Porter that she runs about town with reckless abandon. No supervision and she drives her own buggy. All without any permission from her mother.”

She paused, turned her head from me and tacked on, “She makes me proud to have you for a daughter,” just before slipping back toward the foyer.

I smiled, glad that Mother finally had a poor example to compare me to. As terrible of a child she thought I was, I would never be that irresponsible for my reputation. I, at least, care about my family’s decency, because not even the richest of people can buy off a terrible scandal. I would have to remember this next time Mother scolds me for using the improper spoon at the dinner table.

My attention returned to the dance floor where I spied Josephine dancing with Sebastian. They stepped so lightly and with such precision that I couldn’t find any couple more attractive. When the song ended, Josephine bowed and headed toward the refreshment room. Thinking I could use a nice lemonade and biscuit myself, I followed her.

“So, have you found your husband to be?” I asked, and jokingly tugged at one of her curls.

She turned, laughed, and said, “Miss Jane, you are always the jester aren’t you.”

“I saw you dancing with Mr. Langdon,” I said, and picked up an adorably tiny egg salad sandwich. “You looked quite handsome together.”

“We did?” Josephine’s face lit up. “He didn’t have much to say, but I’m sure he’s just shy. Or perhaps the wise and silent type.” Her eyes glossed over and she bit her lip.

“I feel sorry for the poor man, having his dance interrupted by that girl,” I said, eager to listen to Josephine’s opinion of Laura now.

“Laura? You were right about her before. She is definitely an odd girl.” She paused, and glanced over her shoulder. We headed to a couple of chairs in the corner of the room for privacy. “She is everything a lady should not be. Especially one of her status. If I were that rich...”

“Oh, do go on.” My contempt for Miss Audax grew with every whisper. I was relishing in the idea that someone like me could be viewed more highly than someone of her stature.

“Well, I hardly know where to begin,” Josephine said, and furrowed her brow. “I suppose being so rich she was never taught the value of a good suitor. Do you know of Mr. Vogenshire?”

“I do, I believe,” I said. I vaguely remember hearing Mother talk about him. He was a poor man, and supposedly not very attractive.

“Yes, well she was dancing with him for a majority of the evening.”

“She was?” I said, and put my hand to my chest.

“Imagine a debutante so wealthy giving more than one dance to him,” Josephine said. “It simply doesn’t make sense.”

“I don’t suppose so,” I said. “I thought she was rather smart about her little stunt at the opening, but maybe I was wrong.”

“What do you mean, smart?”

“Just that she is the girl everyone will remember. Nobody will call on her if they forget she exists.”

“Perhaps. That sounds rather manipulative though.” Josephine whipped open her fan and lightly aired herself. “Maybe there was an ulterior motive to getting acquainted with Mr. Vogenshire?”

“Or she was just being kind,” I said. I didn’t believe there was anything on this good Earth that Mr. Vogenshire could offer a well-to-do girl like Laura. Kindness, and a lot of it, was the only reason someone would give him half their night.

“He did look exhilarated.” Josephine smiled a bit, but it vanished when she said, “But kindness doesn’t get you a good husband.”

Josephine had decided to mingle with the gentlemen some more, so she took her leave and headed back to the ballroom. My curiosity about Laura had grown, and I thought I might get more acquainted with her myself instead of listening to secondhand stories about her. I stood from my seat in the corner just when I saw Laura’s golden dress swoop into the refreshment room. Her mother was hot on her heels. She grabbed Laura’s arm and pulled her to a stop near the long table covered in cakes and croissants. She started to say something, and by the looks of it, her mother was not pleased. I wandered over the table and pretended to debate over the chocolate or vanilla cake so that I could hear better. I know it is rude, unladylike, and if Mother found out, she would go into a fit. But, I just couldn’t help myself.

“Don’t talk back to me, girl,” her mother hissed. “He has a special connection with our family. Your father will be very put out if he finds out you have severed that tie.”

“I don’t want to be your business negotiation,” Laura whispered back.

Out of the corner of my eye. I noticed Mother swoop into the room. She looked deep into conversation with Mrs. Porter, but if she saw me standing so near to Lady Audax and her daughter, she was certain to realize I was eavesdropping. I quickly ducked behind a purple velvet curtain hanging over a nearby window, kept one eye on Mother, and tuned back into the conversation.

“Isn’t the point of this ball for me to meet eligible men I could consider a husband?”

“Yes, so why, pray tell, would you turn Mr. Debrine down for a dance?”

Mr. Debrine was a well-known man. He was rich, owned a vast amount of land, and because of it, he was one of the more desirable bachelors.

“I couldn’t possibly marry him,” Laura said.

I could tell mother had seen me hiding behind a curtain, which was sure to look tremendously suspicious. I didn’t want to attract attention to myself by abruptly flouncing out from my hiding place, so all I could do was watch her excuse herself from conversation and charge toward me.

“And why not?” Lady Audax said.

“He is so much older than I am,” Laura grabbed a croissant and started picking it apart.

“He couldn’t possibly make me happy.”

Mother was making her way around the croissant table. I hoped their conversation would end soon.

“Mr. Debrine remained a bachelor waiting for you to come into season,” her mother said, and her face began to soften. “Your father and I think a marriage will be the perfect way to make a permanent connection with our dear friend.”

“You mean with his money,” Laura said, and turned up her nose.

“Laura. The least you can do is dance with him.”

“I wouldn’t want him to think he has a chance.”

“Excuse me young lady—”

“I can’t, mother. I won’t.” Laura’s face dropped all expression, and she gathered her billowing skirt before stomping out of the room.

Since Lady Audax watched her daughter’s exit, I thought it was the best time to sidestep from behind the curtain and avoid Mother exposing me. I tiptoed backward as carefully as I could, and scuttled off.

“What am I ever going to do with that girl?” Lady Audax said under her breath. She plucked a croissant off one of the silver platters. “Do you ever disobey your mother?”

I stopped, looked past my shoulder to see who she might be talking to, but there was nobody but myself within earshot.

“Me, ma’am?” I said.

“Yes, you, girl,” she replied, tearing her croissant in half. “Do you ever defy your mother like Laura does?”

I was shocked that she would be asking me such a question, and I could not find the words to answer her. Instead, I simply stared at her like a buffoon with my mouth hanging open.

“I know you were listening, and I certainly don’t blame you. It appears my daughter has made herself the laughingstock of the evening, with all her unusual habits.” Mrs. Audax said. “I do love her, but sometimes I do wish she were a little more gentle.”

I nodded politely, but I didn’t know how to respond to her. A lady like her shouldn’t be talking to me about her own daughter. Not like this, anyway. I looked past Lady Audax and saw Mother’s warning gaze just several feet away.

Mrs. Audax seemed to take my still silence as an invitation to set her frustrations free. “She is such a good girl, but nobody can see past her quirks and oddities. She is so smart, so skilled, and she has such a heart. Why, just the other day she was telling me how much she enjoys visiting with a little orphan girl who lives in our abbey. But if she could just put it aside for a little while and learn to behave...”

Her eyes lifted from the floor to meet mine, and I could see lines of worry pulling down the folds of her face. She looked old and careworn, and I felt sorry for her. I can’t imagine what it must be like to be a refined lady and still love a shameful daughter.

“I am sorry. I was out of line. Please excuse me,” she said, and quickly stepped towards a group of older ladies near the door.

That was the most unusual, one-sided conversation I’d ever been a part of, if I really had been a part of it at all. I wanted to fill Josephine in with the details. I knew she would just love to hear how Laura’s own mother knows how much of a disgrace she is. Of course, she still loves her daughter, that is to be expected, but that just proves this is not an off night for Miss Laura Audax.

I hesitantly walked passed Mother while giving her the sweetest smile I could manage. She scowled at me and rolled her eyes, but the usual warning signs of impending punishment never came.

I stepped into the foyer to scour every corner for Josephine, but to my surprise, there were only ten to fifteen people in the grand hall. I wondered where everyone could have gone. The ball couldn’t be over, and even if it had ended early, Mother would have told me it was time to go home. I headed to the ballroom and peeked into the doorframe. This room was slightly

more crowded, and a few couples were still dancing, but I still couldn't understand where everyone else had disappeared.

It was then I heard applause coming from down the hall. I followed the noise and soon found the guests gathered in the living area. I couldn't see what they were crowded around, but I did not have to remain in the dark for long. A tone crept into my ears, and delicately changed into a melody I could not recognize, but was full of life. The music sounded like velvet, and my soul begged each note to linger. Then, as softly as the music had begun, I heard a girl's voice join with the piano, and it was a voice that could rival any songbird in springtime.

I saw Josephine among the spectators and inched my way towards her. Her eyes were closed and her shoulders were swaying to the swells of the song. I wanted to ask who sat at the keys, but I dared not interrupt the music.

The last chord resolved and the pianist let the final pitch resonate until it slipped away. Silence filled the room for several moments before the audience erupted into applause. The lady stood, and I caught a glimpse of her bouncing brown curls. Of course, she would be Laura Audax. After an endless carriage ride of hearing her brag about her many talents, I should have assumed she would take advantage of the Langdon's grand piano. At least her talents could live up to the expectation she set for herself.

"There you are, Jane," Josephine said, turning to face me. "Can you believe she wrote that herself?"

"Naturally." At this point, I didn't think anything about Miss Audax could surprise me. Still, it was strange that she could have fabricated something so beautiful.

"This will surely catch the attention of many suitors here," Josephine said, and I caught her looking at Sebastian with a concerned expression.

“I’m sure it will, for some,” I said, touching her shoulder. “But the more sophisticated men want more than just a creative spirit.”

The audience dissipated, some returned to dancing and some decided it was time to head home, but Laura remained standing by the piano staring at the floor.

“She doesn’t look too pleased with herself,” I said into Josephine’s ear. “That’s the most humble I’ve seen her all evening.”

Josephine smiled, and the two of us slipped into the grand hall where Mother had been waiting for me.

“I think it is best we start heading home,” Mother said, and she placed a firm hand on my back. “I’m getting tired, and I don’t want your father to be kept waiting.”

“But the ball isn’t over,” I said.

“I know, but I don’t want to end up sharing a carriage with those two women again.” She inhaled deeply and took a step towards the door. “Come along, then.”

I turned to Josephine to say my good-byes while Mother asked the footman to fetch a buggy. I hugged her tightly and whispered, “Good luck with Mr. Langdon.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Josephine said, but I saw her cheeks turn crimson. “I’ll call on you this week.”

“I’ll be eagerly waiting for a report, about you and anything else the darling Laura does.”

I squeezed her hands and left Earl Langdon’s home. With the help of the footman, I was settled into the buggy across from Mother. This evening was certainly a memorable one, but I was glad to relax and watch the scenery go by in peace.

I heard mother let out a long sigh, and then she softly said, “You’re a good girl, Jane.”

1920: Rights are the Right Thing to Do

I crossed my legs the opposite way and shifted all my weight to my left side, but it wasn't any help. I always start losing feeling in my butt after an hour of sitting in the same wooden desk, and Mr. Haskin's lectures couldn't distract me from the discomfort. He didn't care about making learning fun for our class. It was as if a teaching machine was giving the lecture.

"That's how you want to tell the stories of brave women fighting for justice?" An outspoken girl in the back of the class said and pushed herself out of her seat. For the first time, I understood why the chairs are attached to the desks, because if it weren't, the chair would've been sent flying backwards.

"Sit down, Laura." Mr. Haskin's face was beet red, and his thick-framed glasses trembled on the bridge of his nose.

Laura silently stood, leaning over her desk. Her icy eyes burned, and her mouth was hardened into a thin line.

"I said sit," Mr. Haskin said, slamming his hand against the chalkboard.

"I will not sit," Laura shouted. "Not until you stop teaching suffrage with your chauvinistic ideals."

"I teach the facts, Miss Audax. Nothing more. Nothing less." A piece of chalk snapped in Mr. Haskin's tightening grip.

"Oh, but you say that the suffragettes were silly and unnecessarily violent."

"There are more peaceful ways to—"

"My mother is a suffragette. Her efforts and the efforts of her sisters are the only reason the nineteenth amendment was even passed!" Laura said, as her cropped, brown curls bounced around her face.

“Principal’s office. Now.”

The class sat in silence as Laura stamped out the door and disappeared around the corner. Mr. Haskin took a deep breath, straightened his glasses, and said, “I am sorry for the disturbance. Now, where was I?”

These confrontations between Laura and Mr. Haskin were rather frequent, especially when the lesson concerned suffrage. Any time Mr. Haskin brought the subject up, Laura always had to share her opinion. Not only was our teacher growing tired of her attitude, but it felt like the whole class rolled one giant eye whenever she started to take a stand for something. I didn’t mind her outbursts too much though. I didn’t care about suffrage because I come from a traditional household, but I do enjoy a little distraction from my aches and pains. Besides, it’s kinda funny when Mr. Haskin gets put out of sorts for the rest of class.

I found myself staring at the clock above Mr. Haskin’s head. The second hand had a tendency to tick faster between ten seconds and thirty-five seconds, then slow down until it reached fifty seconds. Somehow, the minute always ended right on time. It was two ten when Mr. Haskin finally released us from his monotone lecture. I grabbed my books and scooted out of the classroom before he could assign any additional assignments because of his bad mood.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and spun around to see my friend Jolene looking mildly annoyed. “Jane! Did you forget to wait for me, again?” She said as she hastened her stride to match mine.

“Hi, Jolene,” I said. “Sorry about that. Just trying to get home as fast as I can.”

“Let me guess. Laura made class awkward and miserable again?”

“Yeah, and on top of that she got the highest grade on yesterday’s test. Again.”

“I’m surprised that Mr. Haskin hasn’t failed her out of spite,” Jolene said, and pushed open the foyer doors. “I saw her coming into school. Can you believe those knickers?”

“I know what you mean,” I said. I thought back to her brown, loose-fitting, shorts. “If I didn’t hear how her mother is a suffragette every day, I would wonder how she got out of the house looking like that.”

“She looks like a man,” Jolene said.

My mother wasn’t a supporter of women’s right to vote because she was a firm believer that a woman’s role is in the house caring for her family. This includes having proper manners and proper clothes suited for ladies. Personally, I quite liked the idea of that lifestyle. I didn’t understand what all the fuss is about, like wanting to get a job or going to college. I just wanted a nice husband who makes a lot of money so he can support our five children. I didn’t mind the fight for women’s rights, but I didn’t think it really applied to the kind of life I wanted.

When the weather was nice, walking home was quite relaxing. Jolene usually walks with me because she lives only a few houses down from mine. The school was built in the middle of a field and had a little stream running between the school and main road, like a little moat keeping us all inside. There’s a rickety wooden bridge that crosses over the stream that hasn’t been rebuilt in years, and it creaks so much I’m always afraid it might break the next time I step on it. I hopped across the bridge as fast as I could, and walked down the main road towards downtown Woodstock, Vermont.

Aside from the cracked sidewalks, Woodstock looks like a promising place. The brick shops are all melted together and stretch on for blocks, and the courthouse’s white corners look clean next to its brick façade.

Jolene and I decided to stop by Mr. Burt's ice cream parlor for a mid-afternoon snack. The checkered floor, red booths, and long ice cream bar was always the perfect atmosphere to put me in a good mood.

"What do you want?" Jolene said.

"I've always wanted to try the new Dreamland Sundae," I said as I scanned the menu. "But, I don't think my mom will appreciate me spoiling my dinner." Last time I stopped by Mr. Burt's, I couldn't finish the meatloaf my mom had made and she took away my dessert for a week. The Dreamland Sundae was supposed to be enough ice cream for three people.

"What if I split it with you?" Jolene suggested.

"What can I get for you, girls?" Sam, the soda jerk asked and gave us a striking smile. I was always glad when Sam was working the bar.

"A Dreamland Sundae, please," I said. I'd just have to force down dinner later so I don't get in trouble again.

"And for you?" he asked, and gestured toward Jolene.

"We're going to split it, I think."

"One Dreamland Sundae and two spoons," he said. "That'll be fifteen cents."

I rummaged through my coin purse and pulled out a nickel I saved from not buying milk at lunch, and Jolene provided a dime. Sam disappeared into the back to look for a wide sundae dish.

I heard the bell on the door tinkle and turned to see who it was. Laura and two other girls from school strolled into the shop and took a seat at the bar. I rolled my eyes and gave Jolene a quick sideways glance. Mom always said if a lady didn't have anything nice to say, she shouldn't say anything at all, but glaring doesn't have anything to do with speaking.

“I don’t think he’ll ever be less close-minded,” said a blond girl in a blue frock named Sarah. “Maybe you should stop. It’ll at least keep you out of trouble.”

“No. Laura is standing up for women everywhere,” said the other girl named Daisy, who was wearing a cloche and loose dress that was belted around the hips. “If we all just stop, we’ll get nowhere.”

“Daisy’s right, Sarah,” Laura said. “We might have the right to vote, but we still don’t have equal rights.”

Jolene scrunched up her nose, open and closed her hand and mouthed, “blah, blah, blah.”

“I know, I know,” Sarah replied. “But I’m just saying you don’t have to go about interrupting class all the time.”

“I will never give up, not until he stops being so pig-headed.” Laura’s nose turned up, and her expression demanded that she said the final word on the subject.

“There goes your hopes of having a decent history class, for once,” Jolene whispered in my ear.

Sam returned with the bowl and plopped two large scoops of vanilla ice cream on it.

“What’ll it be for you three?” He asked, drizzling chocolate sauce over our treat.

Sarah and Daisy both ordered chocolate ice cream covered in peanuts, but Laura asked for her usual. After Jolene and I received our towering bowl of ice cream, cool whip, chocolate sauce, and pineapple dressing, Sam gave Laura a large cup of water and small waffle cone of vanilla ice cream.

“Thank you, Sam,” she said, carefully taking one in each hand. Then, she turned to her friends and said, “Be right back.”

“Where is she going?” Jolene whispered, as we watched Laura step outside the glass door and sit on the sidewalk.

Not too long after she sat down, a small puppy with matted fur came prancing around the corner of the shop. The little guy’s left ear was torn, and he ran with a slight limp. Laura put the cup of water in front of him, but his long tongue began lapping it up before she even set it on the ground. She rubbed his head and tried untangling a few knots with her free hand, and when the puppy’s snout resurfaced, she held the ice cream cone out in front of him. The puppy licked the cone with even more gusto than he drank the water. Laura laughed and scratched him behind his ears while he ate. After a few minutes of playing with little mutt, Laura came back inside Mr. Burt’s.

“One of these days you’re going to give in and take that dog home,” Sam said while rubbing a root beer float cup with a rag.

“Dad’s allergic,” Laura said, and glanced back at the dog with shiny eyes.

Jolene chatted with me about the dessert she plans to try to bake tonight while we were eating our sundae, but I had a difficult time listening. My mind was stuck on Laura’s generosity towards some dirty puppy, because I just didn’t see something like that coming from a girl like her. Caring for a helpless animal was such a nurturing thing to do, and I’d always seen her as the kind of girl who wouldn’t want to look after anyone but herself. Still, caring for a helpless animal was nothing compared to caring for other people. Laura sure was an interesting girl, so who could really say what she would typically do?

When Sarah finished her last bite of ice cream and the three had exited to store, I interrupted Jolene and said, “Why do you think she did that?”

“Did what?” Jolene said. “You weren’t listening to me, were you?” She rolled her eyes and rested her head in her free hand.

“Give that ice cream to the mutt,” I said, ignoring her second question.

“I don’t know, ‘cause she likes it?” She said, throwing her spoon down with more force than necessary.

“I just wouldn’t expect that from her.”

“Why? Just ‘cause she’s a little aggressive with her opinions? That doesn’t mean she’s a terrible person, Jane. I think what she did was very nice, and I don’t think that’s out of character for anyone.” Jolene scooted off her bar stool. “Let’s get a wiggle on.”

Jolene hopped off the stool and threw open the door to the shop. I shoveled the last two bites of ice cream in my mouth, waved goodbye to Sam and skipped out to catch up with her. I felt bad for ignoring her because Jolene could be really sensitive sometimes, and I prepared for a cold shoulder tomorrow.

The next morning I started my walk to school alone, because Jolene volunteered to clap erasers for her Math teacher and had to get to school early. The morning air was starting to get a little frosty, which was usually the first sign of winter. My street was a colorful one, because no two houses looked the same. The yellow house with a wraparound porch was mine, but right next to it was a blue house with bright red shutters. After I rounded the corner from my street to the main road, I saw a boy named Micah from my history class.

“Micah!” I shouted, and ran to catch up with him.

“Hiya, Jane,” he said after turning around to wait for me.

“We sure were lucky that Mr. Haskin didn’t assign any extra homework yesterday,” I said.

“Yup. If it weren’t for that bearcat, Laura, we’d never have anything to worry about.” He readjusted his knapsack. “My brother, Johnnie, said when he had Mr. Haskin it was the easiest class ever. Only had two papers all year.”

“Wow,” I said. That was hardly fair. I thought somebody ought to report Mr. Haskin to the administration, but then again I felt kinda bad for the man. It mustn’t be too easy when one of the students challenges everything he says. “I saw Laura in Mr. Burt’s yesterday. She was talkin’ to her two friends and said she wasn’t ever going to stop.”

“Great,” Micah said, and sighed. “Another crazy feminist in the making.”

“You don’t like feminism?” I asked.

“I don’t care, really,” he said as he cocked his head to the side. “It’s just some of those gals can be real wet blankets.”

Oddly enough, I felt a little sore after he said that. I didn’t know why, especially since my mother would hang me up to dry if she ever caught me spending time with one of those flapper girls anyway.

We reached our high school, and he opened one of the foyer doors for me. As we were entering, he said, “She doesn’t know when to quit. It just makes me want to tune out her constant prattle.” He waved and headed down the math hallway, but I was supposed to meet Jolene in the cafeteria so I waved back and walked in the opposite direction.

I found a table near the entrance and set all my things down on the bench beside me. I poked around my backpack and found *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* I was supposed to read for English class. I was about to start reading when I saw Laura sitting three tables down from me.

She was writing in a journal rather furiously, her eyebrows were knitted together, and her nose was so close to the table that the pages grazed it as she turned them. I tried to ignore her, but I kept glancing up from my book to watch her write.

Finally, my curiosity won. I stuffed my book back in in my bag and swung my feet over the bench. I know my mom didn't approve of girls like her, and she'd say I was looking for a bad influence, but it couldn't have hurt to ask what she was doing. Besides, how would she know I was sitting with a flapper?

Laura momentarily looked up from her journal when I approached her, but when I sat next to her she chose to keep writing instead. I was taken aback that she didn't acknowledge my presence, and immediately regretted my decision to move. But, the damage was done and it would probably have been even more uncomfortable to not say anything to her.

"I'm Jane. I'm in your history class..."

She didn't look up, but she softly muttered, "Yeah, I know."

"What are you writing?" I asked. I could tell she didn't want to talk, but I didn't know how to excuse myself after that.

"A story," She said, and paused. Maybe she only has a way with dogs, so I guessed I should quit being a sap and just leave. As I was about to get up, she said, "It's for the school paper."

"Wow, what's it about?" I said.

"A young woman's struggles to fight for equal rights," she said, finally looking up at me. Again, with the equal rights, I thought. I wondered if she ever thought about anything else, but I guess she was the kind of girl who didn't want to get married, and didn't want to have kids, and all that. She must've had more time to think about wanting a career.

“Do you want to read it?” she said, pushing the journal in front of me. I didn’t really want to, but I didn’t want to be mean, so I flipped to the first page.

After the first paragraph, I was sucked in. It was about a woman, named Shirley, who did a lot of crazy stunts to demonstrate the differences between a man’s life and a woman’s life.

I didn’t agree with everything Shirley did, like trying to enlist in the army, but it was so artfully written and Shirley was so compelling, that I couldn’t help but read just one more paragraph.

Shirley twisted her long, brown curls and brandished the silver scissors. With one swift motion, she slid her hair between the braids and pulled the scissors closed. Her hair fell limp in her trembling hand, and a weight was lifted from her shoulders. Free at last, she thought. Never again would she be bound by the standards of beauty.

“What do you think?” Laura asked, interrupting the scene where Shirley put on the military cap over her freshly chopped hair.

“It’s incredible,” I said, but then I remembered why she was writing it. “The school is going to publish this in the paper?”

“Well, I’m supposed to show it to the editor today,” she said. “But once he reads it, I know he’ll want to run it.”

“How can you be so sure?” I said. I saw Jolene walk into the cafeteria and look around for me. When she saw me sitting with Laura, she cocked her head to the side and walked over to sit with us.

“Because it’s interesting, like you said,” Laura replied, just as Jolene sat down across from us. Jolene glanced at Laura, then looked at me with one eyebrow raised.

“What’s interesting?” Jolene said.

“I’m writing a story for the newspaper.”

“About feminism,” I added, and the corners of Jolene’s mouth twitched.

“Doll,” Jolene said. Her voice sounded like sticky, sweet sugar. “I don’t think your story is gonna get published because you wrote it well. School newspapers don’t get involved in stuff like that.”

“I don’t see anyone else writing anything this good,” Laura said as she snatched her journal and stood up. “I think they’ll think it’s a breath of fresh air.” She turned on her black Mary Jane’s and flounced out of the cafeteria.

“She certainly is full of herself,” Jolene said, releasing a snicker.

“Well, it was very well written,” I said. I felt compelled to defend Shirley and her adventures, but I knew Jolene was right. Laura won’t get such a radical story published anywhere, let alone the school newspaper.

“Goodie for her,” she said, pulling her ponytail over her shoulder. A puff of chalk dust escaped her hair when she ran her fingers through it. “But I think she should spend a little more time learning how to use a stove and a little less time writing stories and getting lost in her own ego.”

“I don’t think cooking is exactly her area of interest,” I said.

“Well whether she wants to be a housewife or an old maid, she is going to need to know these things,” Jolene said. “She can at least have a little humility in the things she does do. Unless that is too lady like for her, too.”

The clock on the wall said it was seven fifty-six, which meant we had four minutes before class started.

“We’ve gotta wiggle,” I said, and pointed at the clock.

I was actually looking forward to history class today because I wanted to ask Laura about how her meeting with the editor went. Mostly, I just wanted to see how smug she was when she has to tell me she was rejected. I sat in my usual desk, but positioned myself sideways so I could see her come in with my peripherals. I watched all my classmates file in, but there was no sign of Laura. When there were only three minutes until class started, I got up and went to Micah’s desk.

“Hey, Micah,” I said. “Have you seen Laura?”

“Not since lunch, I think,” he said. “Maybe she decided to play hookie after her little outburst last class.”

“She’s never done that before.”

“All right, class. In your seats,” Mr. Haskin said, as he got up from his desk and stood in front of the blackboard. “I’m hoping this class might be a little more peaceful than last.”

Mr. Haskin decided to continue his lesson on suffrage, and as I was listening, I couldn’t help thinking about what Laura would be arguing about. Sure she was a little over the top, but at least she had a lot of passion. And she is a kind girl, too; if women had equal rights, then girls like Laura could direct their passion towards feeding the homeless or volunteering at animal shelters. Not only that, but it would be nice to feel like a whole person. Maybe it isn’t enough to spend my life in the shadow of some man.

The class ran another ten minutes late, but at least this time we had no fear of extra homework. I rushed out of class, but this time I remembered to wait for Jolene.

“Held you late, again?” Jolene said.

“Yeah, but it was a quiet class at least.”

“No kidding?”

“Yeah, little miss know-it-all wasn’t in class today,” I said, but I felt a twinge of guilt in my gut.

We had set out on our usual way home through downtown, and talked about whether or not we wanted to go to Mr. Burt’s again.

“I bought milk at lunch today,” I said. “So I really don’t have any money.”

“I think I have some extra coins,” Jolene said. “I’ll pay if you pay me back.”

“I guess. Let’s go.”

When we came across a fork in the road, we veered down the left street towards Mr. Burt’s instead of going right which takes us home. The red and white pavilion of the parlor had just come into sight when we heard a lot of shouting coming from around the block.

“I wonder what’s going on,” I said, slowing down near the corner.

“We can get ice cream another day. Let’s go check it out.” Jolene made a left, away from Mr. Burt’s and towards the noise.

In the distance, we could see a crowd of women in front of the library holding picket signs. The closer we got, we were able to make out that some read “EQUAL OPPORTUNITY” and some had slogans like “BUN IN THE OVEN, BOOK IN THE HAND,” or “RIGHTS ARE THE RIGHT THING TO DO.”

“It looks like some sort of protest,” Jolene said. “Should we go ask about it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we shouldn’t get involved.” What if we were caught, I thought. I couldn’t risk my parents finding out I was at a protest.

“It can’t hurt, can it?”

“No. Jolene. Let’s just go to Mr. Burt’s,” I said, but she had made up her mind. She started walking towards the protesters, so I jogged to catch up with her.

“What are you doing? We could get in—”

“Excuse me, ma’am,” Jolene said to a young woman in a flapper dress. “Why are you protesting the library?”

“You haven’t heard?” the woman said, lowering her sign that read “JOB OR JUSTICE.”

“Mrs. Morris the librarian was fired.”

Jolene turned to look at me for a little clarity, but I just looked at her with wide eyes. She turned back to the woman and said, “I’m sorry. I don’t think I understand. Was she a bad employee?”

“No, kid. She got pregnant and the head librarian fired her.” The woman thrust her sign back into the air and shouted, “We want equal opportunity!”

“Jolene, let’s get out of here before something bad happens,” I said, and I grabbed Jolene’s wrist to lead her away from the crowd.

“Wait,” she said. “I think I see Laura.”

I squinted through the crowd and looked in the direction Jolene was pointing.

“I don’t see her,” I said.

“There.” Jolene’s eyebrows raised, and her mouth fell open. “What is she doing?” she shouted, then pushed her way through the hoard of women.

I thrust out my hand to catch her before she disappeared completely, but I only managed to scratch her forearm.

“Wait! Jolene!” I called, but the women’s chanting drowned my voice. I spun around, but I couldn’t find Jolene or Laura. Then I heard glass shatter near the front of the library and a momentary lapse in the shouting, followed by a tense gasp. Everyone stood still just long enough for me to see Laura on the library steps with a rock the size of a tennis ball in her hand and Jolene wrestling the rock away.

“Stop it! Don’t throw another,” Jolene said between gasps.

“Let me go!” Laura shouted.

“Jane, help me pull her back,” Jolene said.

I fought my way between the bodies of feminists, wrapped my arms around Laura’s waist, and Jolene and I pulled her away from the steps. Laura pushed herself off us and threw the rock towards the library windows. She was too far from her target, so it fell a couple feet short and simply bounced off the concrete and into the brick wall. Jolene moved between Laura and the steps and held her arms out to either side.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“Have you lost your mind?” Jolene screamed.

“They disrespected our rights, so I disrespected their property,” Laura said, and spat at the ground. “An eye for an eye.”

“You’re insane. The only thing that stunt did is make you a vandal,” Jolene said, pointing at a broken window. “You could get arrested for this.”

“It’ll teach them a lesson,” Laura said as she squinted her eyes.

“No it won’t,” Jolene said, and her cheeks flushed. “It’ll just make them mad. Then they won’t pay any attention to what you’re trying to say.”

We heard sirens not too far from the library, and my heart leapt. I didn’t even mean to be at this rally. What if the police had to take me home? There’d have been no faking my way out of this one. I’d have been forbidden from ever seeing the light of day again, not to mention from having friends. My mom would have just said she can’t trust any of the young women these days and I’d been wrongly influenced. I was beginning to remember why I trusted her judgement.

“You better get out of here.” An older woman rushed towards us, making a sweeping motion with her hands. “Because the protest got a little violent, I think the police will be here any minute, so we have to disband.”

“See?” Jolene said, and I thought I saw her eyes well up. She took two steps back, turned on her heel, and ran.

“Jolene!” I shouted, but I didn’t really think she’d wait for me. I grabbed Laura’s arm and dragged her down the street and away from the scene. She pulled away from me, but I held my grip. There was no way I was getting in trouble for Laura’s stupidity. She eventually gave in, but I didn’t let go until I had reached the street I usually turn on to go home.

I dropped her arm and said, “Go home, Laura. You don’t want to get caught.”

“I did what I had to do,” she said.

“You didn’t have to break the library’s windows,” I said. “You know, everything you do actually got me thinking about women’s rights, and I think you got Jolene thinking too. But then you do something like that, and I just feel stupid for considering anything you’ve said.”

“What do you—”

“You’re a fake, Laura.”

“Excuse me? I—”

“Oh dry up. You just do it all for attention, don’t you?” I said. I turned away and walked as fast as I could to my door. Maybe she changed my mind about what I want in life, but I couldn’t follow the example of someone so irresponsible. I reached my front door, turned the knob, and stepped inside.

2015: Smithson Road

My day is never better than when it ends with a little bit of drama. Better yet, someone else's drama. As usual, the final school bell rang and I met up with Jodie at her locker and headed out to the bus line up, but this time we were stopped by a mass of students blocking the foyer doors. I hesitated to join them because I didn't want to miss the bus, but Jodie grabbed my arm and skipped up to the edge of the crowd.

"But it's so cold out, I don't want to have to walk home," I said, trying to pry her fingers off of my wool coat. It was almost twenty degree's out, which was actually pretty warm for an Ontario winter.

"The buses can't leave if this many students haven't gotten on yet," she said.

It made enough sense to me, so pushed up to the edge of the crowd, giggled, and felt my stomach knotting with excitement. I'm hardly ever present for an infamous Pembroke High School fight.

"What's happening?" Jodie said. "I can't see anything." She jumped up and down in an attempt to catch bits of the action.

I'm a couple inches shorter than Jodie, but I tried craning my neck and standing on my tiptoes anyway. "Beats me, there are too many people in the way."

"Some girl is pickin' a fight with Derek." A tall boy with straw-like hair, named Sean, announced for the shorties in the back of the crowd like us. "I think Derek was pickin' on Marc and she got pissed and stuck up for the little guy."

I could hear a voice with steady authority shouting over a nasally voice I recognized as Derek's, but the horde's tense murmurs smudged the words so I couldn't understand what she

was saying. Then, a third voice boomed over both voices, which sent a hush over the ogling students.

“Mr. Morris just got here. I guess the show’s over,” Sean said before he and a couple other guys meandered towards the exit.

The vice principal, Mr. Morris, always went on a power trip whenever there was any sort of commotion because everyone involved always ended up with weekend detention. This time, he brought two administrator flunkies with him for crowd control. They waved their arms, squawking at us to get on our busses and that there’s nothing to see here. Jodie and I hung back for as long as possible to get a glimpse of the crazy girl sticking up for the class weirdo.

Her chocolate curls settled in organized chaos on top of her head, feebly restrained by a thin blue and black plaid headband. She had a proud face, with her chin held high despite being berated by Mr. Morris, and the dimple on the left side of her face gave an illusion of a permanent smirk. She wore a blue t-shirt that said “Fault Culprits,” the name of a band I didn’t recognize, dark-wash skinny jeans, and a pair of black flats. I don’t think I had ever seen her before, but we were ushered out of the lobby before I could get a better look.

“Jane, I think I know who that was,” Jodie whispered as if she were afraid we might get in trouble for talking about it, “That was Laura.”

“Laura?” I whispered back. “From algebra? That can’t be her, she has blond hair.”

“No, no. You’re thinking of Laura Bell. I mean Laura Audax. She’s in my US history class. I’m not super surprised though. She kinda has a stick up her butt about everything.” Jodie performed her famous eye roll, which was overdramatized by heavy makeup and fake eyelashes.

“What does that mean?” I giggled, but inwardly braced for one of her long-winded, opinionated rants.

“Well, you know how all those hipster kids have always got to be, like, super weird? Different, you know? Laura’s just like that, but way more intense. She’s always standing up for the underdog and putting her opinion out there in class. I mean, it’s history; what she has to say about it won’t change the facts. It’s not enough for her to just let other people think what they wanna think. She’s gotta get all up in everyone’s business about it.” After a slight pause, and a small huff, she tacked on, “It’s stupid and annoying.”

“I think it’s kinda nice that she was standing up for Marc, though.” I started to raise my voice so Jodie could hear over the bustling students trying to escape their high school dungeon and seek refuge on their busses. I remembered when I was bullied in elementary school for getting new glasses. I wished I would’ve had someone like Laura to stand up for me back then.

“Yeah, whatever. I guess the weirdos are gonna stick together. Am I right?” Jodie yelled back. “Hey, I’ll see you tomorrow morning. My bus driver hates me for no reason and she’ll leave without me on purpose if I’m not there early. Toodles!”

I quickly waved goodbye and hurried to my own bus. They were parked in two diagonal rows, and my bus was never in the same spot two days in a row. I walked right past it the first time because the little black numbers on the fender are so small, but I was able to catch it the second time down the line just before the doors swung shut.

I glanced at my watch again. The bus was three minutes late already. I danced back and forth on my feet to warm myself and to keep my excitement in check. My Facebook feed last night was overrun with posts about yesterday’s debacle. I could tell the school is drama starved

when a little outbreak like that gets people talking, but I'd bought in to it so I must be just as hungry. I would have skipped freezing at the bus stop to hitch a ride with my mom if I didn't want to get to school early and gossip all about Laura.

The faded yellow of our old bus finally rounded the corner, the driver let us on, and we were shielded from the icy wind. I took my usual seat about eight rows back and stretched out because my bus buddy wasn't at the bus stop today. I rifled through my backpack for any spare tissues to mop up my runny nose as the bus, ever so slowly, rolled to the next stop. A couple people at this stop were jumping around for warmth, but one girl who was standing still as if she were too cool to be bothered by the cold. The curly mess that seeped out underneath her brimmed beanie caught my eye, and as she climbed the bus steps I could see that she was the famed Laura Audax.

She walked like the president performing ballet, graceful and commanding, and she found an empty seat two rows up and across the aisle from mine. Laura could be the hero for the dorky kids who don't know how to stand up for themselves, and I admired that. I wanted to say something to her, like some sort of consolation before the inevitable tsunami of judgement demolished her. I grabbed my backpack, tried to stay steady on the moving bus, and sat next to her.

"Hey," I said. She turned her head toward me. "I just wanted to say that I think what you did yesterday was really cool of you."

"Um, okay. Thanks, I guess," she said without a smile.

I didn't know what else to say, short of launching into my own sob story of being called "window woman" when I was ten. She didn't seem to appreciate my thanks, or want to carry on

the conversation. Maybe she just felt awkward about compliments, or she could be upset that I only noticed her after she got in trouble.

I pulled into myself, trying to hide from the tension that was probably only one sided. How could I have never noticed her on the bus before? She doesn't seem the type who could fade into the background. There is no way she could have known, or cared, that I unintentionally ignored her all year, but I still felt more uncomfortable next to her than I would next to a giant tarantula.

Everyone else riding the bus seemed to feel the same way, because the usual jungle-like atmosphere seemed more like a museum since Laura sat down. Muted whispers about the featured exhibit bounced around the rickety interior of the bus so every now and then I could hear "Nice of her to stand up for the poor guy," and "Shoulda minded her own business. The kid needs to learn to stick up for himself." I turned away from the icy window and pulled my hat down, feeling embarrassed for Laura. But out of the corner of my eye, I could see her slight smile with that smirking dimple.

After third period, I found Jodie at her locker, per usual, before we headed to algebra.

"Jane," she said in her sing-song, I-have-secrets voice, "I found out what happened. Derek was talking to some guys and they dared him to stick his foot out and trip Marc, so he did. Then, Laura flipped out on him and was yelling and stuff like that. Then, get this, she slapped him square on the mouth! His lip is all swollen to prove it." Jodie's eyes were wide with enthusiasm. "Anyway, now I hear she's gonna get expelled."

"I doubt it. Who did you hear that from anyway?" I said. School policy doesn't expel students for anything that minor.

“Liam said it. He was there when Bryce dared Derek. He does tend to exaggerate though.” Jodie’s voice softened as she realized her facts weren’t all that sound and that she probably already told the whole school Laura was getting expelled.

“Well I’m all for her smacking Derek; glad somebody has decided to put him in his place.”

“Yeah, he can be a serious jerk,” Jodie stated, “too bad he’s such a cutie. Hey, who do you think he’s asking to Homecoming? It could be you.”

“God help him if he tries asking me to Homecoming. The bell’s gonna ring. We’re gonna be late to algebra if we don’t start moving.”

Things were a little more serious than I thought they had been, and I could see why Laura didn’t feel like talking about it on the bus that morning. Standing up for someone was one thing, but she probably got into a decent amount of trouble for hitting Derek.

It’s easy for administrators to get caught up in the logistics of keeping the peace, instead of focusing on whether or not she did the right thing. On the last day of fourth grade, I took my mother’s advice and stood up to Kelly Copperfield after she stole my glasses. I called her a stupid jerk and threw a handful of playground mulch in her face. My teacher, Ms. Pollis, saw me do it, and sent me to the principal who decided I had to stand with Ms. Pollis during recess for the rest of the month instead of getting to play with my friends.

The day dragged on like any other day. The Laura scandal died down; aside from finding out what happened and making your opinion known, there was nothing else to be said about it.

I hadn't heard of, or thought of Laura for weeks. She blended back into the crowd of anonymous nobodies and new events buried her deep beneath the social radar. I saw Laura on my bus every day, but she only sat in the aisle across from mine and stared out the window.

Forcing myself to wake up at six o'clock on Monday morning after sleeping in until noon is not my idea of a good time, but somehow I managed to trudge out to the bus stop, which was buried three feet under snow. I couldn't believe the school board decided not to cancel school, or at least give us a two-hour delay. After a couple of missed classes, I guessed the school officials of Pembroke valued making quotas over student safety.

We rode the bus one stop after another, too tired to chat about our weekends. After the last stop, the bus route took us along windy, woodsy, Smithson Road before reaching our high school destination. Pembroke was a developed city, but a couple old roads ran through stretches of forest that contained only one or two run down houses. I thought these areas were peaceful, and when the weather was a bit warmer, I would pull down my window and listen to bird songs or the trickle of the shallow stream that ran parallel to Smithson Road.

I felt my eyes droop, and I swayed with the gentle rhythm of the bus lurching over small rocks in the gravel road, until I was jerked awake by an unexpected heave. Confused, I wiped the steam off the window with my gloved hand and saw the bus rolling off the edge of the road.

"Oh my god!" A girl in the front row wailed. "The bus driver!" She pointed a shaky finger to the twisted, limp body that had fallen over the steering wheel.

In an instant, the bus filled with terrified shrieks. A couple of wide-eyed guys were clinging to the brown leather seat in front of them, either to brace themselves or for the comfort of security. I covered my head and prayed for the first time in years that I might live through whatever was about to happen. Laura took action and sprinted towards the driver.

I lifted my head when I saw her snow boots dart past my seat to the front of the bus. The bus skidded through the snow, slid down a slight hill, slammed into a birch tree. I fell forward and banged into the seat in front of me. Some kids in the back flipped over the seats in front of them and fell on top of the students in them. The girl next to me—I think her name is Tina—was holding a hand up to her temple and I saw a little blood oozing between her fingers. I pulled her shoulders back so she could rest on my lap.

“Stay awake and keep pressure on it,” I said as soothingly as I could. I whipped around to face the sobbing girl behind me and shouted, “Call 911!”

I remembered that Laura wasn't in her seat, and swung my head into the aisle to make sure she was all right. She had been thrust to the front of the bus, but she was pulling herself up onto shaky knees, grabbed the keys, and yanked them out of the ignition. Her hand wrapped around the door lever and she let herself fall, pulling it down with her body weight. The doors feebly shook, but didn't fold open. Using the dashboard, Laura hoisted herself onto her feet. I could see her wince, and a few tears ran down her cheek when she put weight on her left foot, which was bent inward at an unnatural angle.

Laura looked ferocious, like she was mustering all her strength and anger into this moment. She lunged, shoulder first, into the doors, but lost her footing on her broken ankle and lost all impact. Rodney, a boy in the third row, recognized her efforts and scrambled to assist her. He copied Laura's movements and used his shoulder as a battering ram, and after four attempts, the right door unhinged and crashed to the ground. The bus rocked from the force and the birch tree swayed, daring to snap and let the bus fall to one side.

“Everybody needs to get off the bus and stay away from it.” Laura’s commanding voice resounded through the bus. “If anyone is too injured to get off alone, don’t be a selfish and help them.”

A couple students who were uninjured climbed over the students in the aisles, terrified and panicked to find safety. The rest of us followed what our school has always taught us to do in an emergency: remain orderly and stay efficient. Only Laura, Tina, and a freshman boy, who had broken his arm, seemed to have serious injuries.

I waited for everyone else to get off the bus before I wrapped Tina’s arm around my shoulder and hoisted her onto her feet. We staggered down the narrow aisle and all the while, I was asking her questions to keep her awake. Rodney waited by the door and caught her in his arms to help her down the stairs.

“Don’t let her fall asleep,” I said. “I think she might have a concussion.” Rodney nodded, began talking to her, and carried her back up to the road where the other students were waiting.

Laura was still sitting by the driver. Her hands gripped the lapel of his coat and she shouted in his ear, “Wake up, you have to get off the bus! It’s going to fall down the hill!” She faced me, fearful tears swirling in her eyes. “Help me get him off.”

I took a deep breath, fought my survival instincts and threw myself back into the wobbling bus.

“He’s still breathing,” Laura wheezed, out of breath from violently shaking the driver in attempt to revive him. “But I don’t think he is going to wake up. Help me get him out of the seat and then get his arms.”

Laura stayed seated so she wouldn't put any more weight on her foot, but she managed to grab hold of his feet and swing them to the side of the chair. I reached under the driver's thick arms and thrust him to the floor of the bus, and he hit the ground with a small thud.

"Watch his head," Laura said, while stabilizing herself on the rocking bus. I felt my breath coming up short; the panic I had been suppressing was bubbling to the surface. Laura must have noticed my face twist, so she whispered in a voice smoother than porcelain, "We are going to be fine, I promise." I nodded and swallowed, choosing to trust her words and just pull.

The driver was not a slim man, so when I circled my arms under his armpits, I couldn't lift his back any higher than two or three inches off the ground. Laura placed her hands behind his knees and pushed his lower half along while I carried his top half. Rodney saw our struggle from the road and ran to our aid. Being considerably stronger than either of us, Rodney was able to haul the driver down the steps and into the tamped-down snow. He kept dragging the driver away from the teetering bus, so I wrapped one arm around Laura's bad leg and one around her back to help get her away from danger as fast as possible.

By the time we started toward the others, police officers and EMT's had already gathered around the students by the road, and a couple were headed our way with two stretchers. The bus driver was rolled onto the black cushion and had an oxygen mask strapped over his nose and mouth. Three EMTs pushed him back up the snowy hill and lifted him into an ambulance that already contained the boy with a broken arm.

Laura, with the help of two EMTs, hoisted herself onto the second stretcher and she too was rolled up to the second ambulance with Tina. I was ushered into the crowd of uninjured students and was given a thermal blanket to put around my shoulders. There was only one left, so I let Rodney share with me. We huddled together, let out our fear and breathed in relief. We

heard a snap and a faint groaning sound. I lifted my head just in time to see the birch tree give way under the weight of the bus and expose the juicy brown wood hidden within its zebra shell. The bus fell on its side and slid down the hill. I covered my face with the blanket and sobbed.

I stopped taking the bus to school, even when they assigned a new driver. After a couple days of interviews and news reports, constantly reliving that day has melded the memories into my head and I couldn't get past it. We learned that the bus driver had been drinking the night before, and had passed out from dehydration. He was fired and good thing too. Luckily, for us and for him, nobody died and nobody had to be in the hospital for more than one night. Tina had to stay overnight because they wanted to keep an eye on her concussion.

My mom drives me everywhere now, and we pick Laura up on the way to school. She says she appreciates it, but is going to start riding the bus again once she gets off her crutches. I'm one-hundred percent certain she will be the only one from our route ever on it again.

I wouldn't say Laura and I are close. Just because we went through a "traumatic experience" together doesn't mean that we have to be best friends. We were on FOX and NBC together, and I could tell Laura loved being in the limelight. She never grew tired of the attention and being forced to repeat herself every time a different news station came to see us. Mostly, I let her do all the talking and just stood there looking like a "hero." That's what they're calling us, but I guess she is more of a hero than me. I only just did whatever she told me to do. I think Rodney should have been there with us, because without him we might not have made it out of that bus before it went careening down the hill. I didn't know Laura very well before, but she must have had some ego to get this caught up in the media over something we could have died from.

“As scary as the whole situation was, it was really quite exhilarating,” Laura talked endlessly about the accident. She hardly ever talked about anything else, but then again that might just be because we don’t have much to talk about. “I would never say that on the news of course. The media would twist my words and make me out to be some kind of villain.” I just smiled and nodded at a lot of what she said while I helped carry her books to her locker. This attitude of hers was starting to get on my nerves.

“I was just terrified. There is no looking back and feeling any different for me,” I said, thinly masking my exasperation.

The more I got to know Laura, the more conflicted I felt about her. I couldn’t wait to drop her books off and get away from her, but when she wasn’t talking about how great she was, she could be so interesting. She knew everything there was to know about art, and she had hilarious stories about when she played piano for seniors in the retirement ward. One man would give her a new ugly hat every time she visited. Still, I couldn’t listen to one more story about how brave she was when she saved the bus driver with a broken ankle.

“She is nice enough, but her ego is way over the top,” I said to Jodie on our way to Algebra. “It’s as if she has some superiority complex just because she’s one of the smart kids. Every now and then she throws in a word that I don’t understand, and I think she does it on purpose because it shows how smart she is.”

“Wow, what a show-off,” Jodie said. “It’s like, she does something great and goes and ruins it by talking.”

I smiled, but said, “I’m being unfair though. She might be self-centered, but at least she’s a good person. Nobody else thought about saving the bus driver.”

“You did too. You helped pull him out.”

“Sure, but I wouldn’t have if Laura didn’t ask me to help her. Broken ankle and all and she was still thinking about helping him instead of saving herself.” I felt guilty about my irritation with Laura. She really was a hero and I still managed to focus on the things that annoy me. “I guess people’s flaws stick out more than the good things.”

“Except me, you see the good in me first.” Jodie said as she hop-skipped up to the class door, then winked and added, “but that’s probably just because I’m flawless.”

2100: Malfunction

The lump of mechanics and cloth that sat on my desk did not look the way I had hoped. My Inventions and Innovations class required that we imagine and design an invention that combined modern technology with retro objects for our final project, and I was falling way behind. I wanted to take the old-fashioned backpack design and incorporate it with the hover design of our computer cube cases, but I couldn't figure out how to make the cloth exterior sturdy enough to actually provide a decent amount of protection. My whole project looked like an old lunch box in a dress. I struggled with the zippers the most. Every time I pulled it open, the mechanism got snagged on the cloth, on my sleeve, or on my hair. I wondered why people put these things on everything back then.

Every Friday, our teacher wanted us to present our projects to make sure we were making a decent amount of progress. It was nearing the end of the day and two other girls and I hadn't presented yet. Cyl, the teacher's assistant, rolled down the aisle between the workstation tables and waited for one of us to volunteer. He was an earlier model of the artificially intelligent personal assistants, or AIPA, that most people had. Because project presentations are practically the same each week, our teacher, Ms. Jones, let Cyl supervise the class.

I kept my head low, and covered my pathetic hover-bag with my arms. If he didn't see me, he might not remember that I didn't get a chance to present last week either. My project was an embarrassment compared to some of the other projects in the class. One boy took a microchip music player and attached it directly to vintage earbuds, and it actually worked.

Cyl turned down my row, and his eyes focused in on my face. I was about to accept defeat and raise my hand when Laura, the class know-it-all, stood up.

“I’d be happy to present my project now, Cyl,” she said. I should have known she’d volunteer to go. Laura always saved her own project for last, probably because she thought it was the best.

Laura flounced to the front of the room, and twirled to show off the sleek, pocketless, vintage jacket that hugged her skin. She smiled as if she had just won the Nobel Prize. I remembered her telling the class that every time she had a breakthrough on her invention, she felt one-step closer to becoming a billionaire.

“The design is very thrifty,” Cyl, the teacher’s assistant said.

“I wouldn’t want it to cost too much, Cyl,” Laura said, and she unzipped the jacket, and then folded it neatly over her forearm. She didn’t seem to struggle with the concept of zippers as much as I did.

“I see that this project is different than last week’s project,” Cyl said. His small, silver body rolled toward her, and he extended a stick thin arm and claw to inspect the jacket.

“Yeah, I hit a snag with my replicator and couldn’t figure out what to do next,” Laura said. “So I came up with a new idea I thought I’d work on instead.”

“I’m afraid I do not understand what is special about a common jacket, Miss Audax.” The little robot powered on a pale blue screen on his chest and went to input information before Laura stopped him.

“It’s not a jacket!” she said. “I mean it is, but it does other stuff too.”

Cyl powered the screen back off and his eyes lit up to look like half-moons when he said, “Please explain your jacket, Miss Audax.”

“It’s air conditioned! You can input what temperature you like here,” Laura said, lifting the sleeve to show a tiny screen. “And then the jacket will maintain it, no matter what the outside weather is like.”

“Do you wish to demonstrate?” Cyl said.

“I haven’t figured it all out yet, but I hope to have part of it working by next week.”

Joi, my best friend, raised her hand and wiggled it around in the air.

“Yes, Miss Cayne?” Cyl said, pointing a claw at her.

“Um, what if you put the screen in a pocket so it doesn’t look so catawampus?” Joi said.

“It doesn’t have pockets,” Laura said.

“But you could put them there. It’s not difficult—”

“I like it like this,” Laura said, squinting her eyes and furrowing her brow.

Joi’s jaw dropped and she inhaled. She looked like she was about to keep fighting her point, but the look on Laura’s face warned her not to. Laura shut down all our suggestions before, but she’d never been that forceful. Lately, Joi had been complaining about Laura a lot and I wondered if I was missing something.

“Thank you, Laura,” Cyl said, slicing the tension. “We have run out of time for this class. I must make an announcement before you leave. There will be an extra credit project. You will do five hours of technologically related community service. If you have any suggestions for the class, you may make them now.”

Laura, who still hadn’t sat back in her chair, raised her hand, but started speaking before Cyl called on her.

“I volunteer at the homeless computer labs,” she said and smiled as if she hadn’t just snapped at Joi. “They’re always looking for help. I’m going there this afternoon if anyone wants to go with me.”

“Thank you, Miss Audax,” Cyl said. He scanned the room, but nobody else had raised their hands. “Class dismissed.”

That didn’t sound like a bad idea, and I knew I’d be needing that extra credit to make up for my disastrous final. One afternoon with Laura couldn’t be that bad. I closed the typing hologram of my computer cube and waited patiently while Laura discussed something with Cyl. After a couple minutes, she nodded and headed for the door.

“Hey, Laura,” I said, and stepped toward her.

“What’s up?”

“I was just thinking I could go to the labs with you. For the project,” I said.

“Oh!” Her face lit up. “Yeah, that’d be great! We can meet up outside the foyer doors after last period. It’s not a far walk.”

She smiled and ducked out of the classroom. I followed her, and as I rounded the corner, I came face to face with Joi.

“She gets on my last nerve,” Joi said, leaning close to my ear. I would have asked who she was talking about if it weren’t for her seething stare at the bouncing brown curls on the back of Laura’s head.

“Why? Because she didn’t like your idea?” I said, and smirked. Joi was always a tad over dramatic when things didn’t go her way, but I still thought this wasn’t just about the pockets.

“She didn’t have to like it, but she also didn’t have to be such a jerk about it.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” I said, and avoided making eye contact.

“Not that bad? What about last time when she told Kendal she was stupid?” Joi said, but upon realizing that she was practically shouting, she lowered her voice so Laura, who was still a few yards ahead of us, didn’t hear. “She’s so awful about that stuff! Always acting like the rest of our inventions are really dumb.”

“I guess, but I don’t think she means to be mean.”

“I think she does, and I think she enjoys it too.”

We walked down the rest of the hallway in silence, and turned into the locker pod. Joi and I shared a plastic, blue locker that could barely hold both of our lunches. Several years ago, schools started issuing standard computers to all the students, and textbooks became obsolete; so, the school board ripped out all the old, floor lockers and put hundreds of tiny boxes into one locker pod. I don’t think they anticipated the practicality of this new layout, and I really don’t understand why they haven’t fixed it by now, because my Math teacher said they were just as difficult ten years ago. I guess student comfort wasn’t on their agenda of educational improvements.

Like every other day, the pod was packed to the brim with students shoving each other and fumbling with safe codes. It looked like everyone was dying of thirst and the lockers were an oasis.

“Why do I ever put my lunch in there?” I said, and felt my entire body fight against entering the mass chaos.

“I didn’t today,” Joi said, brandishing a brown bag from her purse. “You can have half my sandwich if we can just go to the cafeteria and skip this insanity.”

I agreed. Looking at that mess was more than enough incentive to skip lunch.

After my last class in twenty-first century history, I headed toward the back of the school instead of my usual trip to the front where the buses were. I decided to leave my lunch in the locker overnight, hoping that I might be able to get to it easier in the morning. I saw Joi headed down the same hallway towards the bus. Her purple pigtails always stand out in any crowd.

“Where are you going?” She asked, and pointed towards the front doors.

“Oh, I’m meeting Laura to do that homeless thing,” I said.

“Today?” Joi asked. “I thought we were gonna go check out that new food pill. Especially since you didn’t have lunch.”

“I’m so sorry. I totally forgot!” I said. “But this is for class credit. I have to go. I already told Laura—”

“Oh yeah. Her. Have fun with princess smarty pants.” Joi said.

“What’s your deal about her?” I said, starting to feel frustrated about Joi’s unwarranted hatred.

“I just don’t get why everyone else likes her so much when she’s so full of it,” Joi mumbled. “Well, anyway. I guess I’ll just see you tomorrow.” She kept her eyes on the floor as she walked back down the hallway.

Joi never really cared about Laura’s refusal to take advice before, but I had a feeling her contempt could’ve been a matter of being personally rejected. She’d always sought after Laura’s friendship before, but that was mostly just because Laura got invited to the craziest parties. I guess Joi valued her pride more than her love of colored lights and ridiculous dancing. Maybe she was finally tired of pretending to like her for popularity.

I approached the back foyer wall, which was two giant sheets of glass with an automatic door in the middle, and saw Laura standing on the other side. She was wearing the jacket she

presented in class, and her perfect posture made her slender frame look distinguished. She was holding a skim board, which was the legal hover board for street-riding because it flies so low to the ground. The doors slid open when I pressed my thumb to the scanner next to them. School security policies got more intense every ten years since the 2030's, and the last update mandated that all students and faculty use thumbprint scanners to gain entry to the building.

“Ready to go?” she asked.

“Aren't we walking?” I said, gesturing towards the skim board.

“Oh, yeah. I ride this to school, but I'll let it just float behind us. I've got a board leash,” She said, and held up a thin leather string that was attached to a ring on the front of the board. “It's this way.”

“Just a second, I gotta call Cycro,” I said, pressing a red button on my black bracelet.

“Is that your AIPA?”

“Yeah. It's the new model that hovers so he won't take long. They're pretty fast. What about yours?”

“It's the rolling kind, like Cyl, so I leave her at home.”

After two minutes, I saw Cycro's metallic body rocketing toward us. He looked just like Cyl, but instead of wheels, Cycro had no feet at all.

“Hey, Jane. I hope I haven't ke— *krrzt*. Kept you long,” he said in a monotone voice.

“Sounds like his vocal amplifier and modifier are broken,” Laura said. “I can fix that for you sometime if you want.”

“That'd be great! Thanks,” I said. I thought this wouldn't be too bad, and Laura might only be super uptight in classes. “I guess we better get going now.”

We didn't talk for a few minutes while we took a shortcut past the high school's new parking platforms. When the driving age was lowered to fourteen, since self-driven cars were much safer, all the freshmen started taking their cars to school and the administration thought it was best to demolish the parking lot. Instead, each student got a personal parking space that hovered neatly in columns. All they had to do was input their space number into the parking station, wait for their platform to hover down, park on the platform, get out of the car, and send their car back up to the platform's spot.

The shelter was a few streets past the high school, so Laura thought it would be nice to walk through Irvine Park instead. The tall, cast iron gate usually deterred me from entering, but there wasn't much greenery around the city and it looked like a nice change, so I agreed with little hesitation.

"It's nice that the city built this place. I never bought into the hype of California beaches," Laura said, and she breathed in deeply. "The air is a little less salty here."

"Yeah," I said. The trees lined the stony pathway that we walked along, and off to the right was a little duck pond. My mom was a city biologist, and she said they like to observe the wildlife as if they were a part of the flock, so they mixed mechanical ducks in with the rest of them. The robots looked convincing enough for birds, and if I didn't know any better I'd have had no idea some of them weren't real.

After a couple moments I asked, "So what are we gonna do at this lab?"

"It'll be up to the lab manager, but I usually work in 3D food printing."

"They do that?" I said, wrinkling my nose. "Isn't it super gross?"

"Disgusting. But it's cheaper than buying groceries, and most of them don't care as long as it fills their stomachs." Laura's eyes fixated on her brown, auto-fit, boots.

“Message from—*krzzt* Joi,” Cycro said, and the screen on his chest lit up and read: *Is she talking about how awesome she is for being so selfless?*

I hastily put my hand to the screen, hoping Laura didn’t sneak a peek, and said, “I’ll take my messages when I get home, Cycro.”

I noticed we were approaching a square, skinny building with a flat roof that said “Community Computer Lab” in blue neon lights. It looked as if it had been built in the 2050’s with all the mirrored paneling. The human race used to have such tacky taste in architecture. Buildings were so boxy back then; I didn’t know how they could stand looking at all the harsh edges. The lab looked very out of place in the middle of the metallic, cylindrical, apartment complexes built last year. It was situated in between Modelle’s, the thrift store for furniture, and Nutty Sprinkles, my favorite ice cream beads shop. Out of all the times I went to Nutty Sprinkles, I never knew this building was a computer lab for the homeless.

Laura picked up her skim board, held open the door for me, and motioned that I follow her up the escalator that was located in the middle of the foyer. After reaching the third story, I noticed about sixteen Innertouch computers laid out on the wooden floor. It looked strange to see so many in one place, because I was so used to seeing only one in my own home. A couple of the circular pads had a homeless person standing in the middle and interacting with the green holographic screens surrounding them.

A middle-aged, brunette woman in a simple white dress noticed us and walked our way with a digipad.

“Laura! I was beginning to worry you weren’t coming today,” she said, handing Laura the blue tablet. “Karcie didn’t show up and we’re a little short-staffed in printing.”

“Sorry. I brought someone, so I walked instead of riding,” Laura said while signing her name on the tablet with her finger.

“Oh, goodness me. I’m such a dunce,” the woman said, extending her hand. “I’m Mrs. Willard, but you can just call me Millie.”

“I’m Jane,” I said. Laura handed the thin plastic digipad to me, and disappeared into an adjoining room.

“Just sign your name on that,” Millie said, pointing to a line that read *general volunteer*. “Just so we can keep track of who’s been here. Some people do this for volunteer hours.”

“That’s actually what I’m here for,” I said.

“I see. Well, we can just keep you here in the basic lab. We have printing back there, where Laura is,” Millie said, and flung her arm in a random direction behind her. “And, the room to the left is for teaching classes in how to use the Innertouches.”

Millie spent about half an hour explaining the duties of all the different volunteers, and then filling me in on what my responsibilities were. After several interruptions from the visitors, I gathered that I was supposed to simply go around and ask if any of the visitors needed any help, and then run a virus scan through all the unused computers. It seemed simple enough, so I thanked Millie, instructed Cycro to wait in the foyer, and strode towards a bearded man in a heavy blue coat who was standing on the nearest Innertouch.

“Good afternoon, sir,” I said, waving at him from behind the hologram. “Do you need any—”

“What’s this do?” he said, waving his hand in front of the control panel image to his left.

“It’s the control panel. You can change the—”

“And what about this, here?” he said, flinging his hand towards the documents folder, and accidentally opening the internet browser in the process. Of course, the first person I talked to here was crazy.

“Well, it’s—”

“How do they expect us to do anything with all this mess happening at the same time?” The man said. He dropped his arms to his side, and looked directly into my eyes.

“I’m sorry, sir,” I said, but because this was my first time working in customer service, and since I had been interrupted three times already, the pressure kept me from forming any more words. My cheeks burned, and I started dodging my glances around for Millie to save me. Luckily, she was standing watch in the back corner.

“I’ll help you over here, Mr. Attas,” she said, and directed him with her arms to the learning room.

“Don’t you worry about him,” a creaky voice said behind me. I spun around and saw an elderly lady wearing a loose blue dress and a green coat covered in pockets.

“He’s just reached the age where he can’t figure out all this new technology,” she said. Her eyes crinkled, and she gave me a smile. “I remember when I used to think I would always keep up with the gadgets. Look at me now. I can hardly figure out how to take a selfie.”

“Are you having trouble, too?” I said. I felt my nerves creep up my spine. I wasn’t sure I was cut out for this job.

“No, missy. I only come here for the food,” she said. “But, I’ve never seen you around before.”

“Laura brought me. I’m here for class,” I said. “Not that I wouldn’t help out otherwise!” I hoped I didn’t sound like I didn’t want to be here. I didn’t, really, but I didn’t want her to think that I was selfish.

“Of course, dear. I’m Mrs. Yismin.” She paused, but after a moment said, “Laura’s a sweet girl. She has her moments, but her hearts in the right place. I’m glad she’s got some friends like you.” The woman patted my hand and hobbled off into the printing room.

I decided I would rather run virus scans than talk to any more visitors, so I hopped on the nearest Innertouch pad and powered it up. I brushed my finger against the menu hologram and scrolled until I found the virus scanner application. I opened it and let it run its course.

As I was waiting for it to complete, I thought about what the old lady said. Laura had a reputation for being a little rowdy and, according to some people like Joi, disagreeable. But everyone has flaws and I think Laura is no exception. As long as her heart is in the right place, she’s not so bad. At least, not as far as I’m concerned.

After running six different virus scans, I read the time on one of the Innertouches. It was already ten past six and I had to head home before it got too dark outside. I looked around for Millie, but as far as I knew she was still in the learning room with that bearded man. I saw the digipad sitting on a table near the door, so I signed myself out, found Cycro flying in circles around an agitated spider, and headed down the escalator.

I had one foot out the front door when I heard a voice calling my name. I turned and saw Laura hopping down the escalator behind me.

“I figured I’ll walk with you, just in case you forgot the way back,” she said.

“Thanks!” I said.

“I bet we’d go faster if we both rode my skim board,” she said, tossing it to the ground. The underside of the board glowed on the concrete when the hover function kicked in.

“Isn’t there a weight limit?” I said, and felt a little apprehensive about the idea. Those things can get pretty fast and I didn’t want to be taking a nosedive off the front end.

“It’s fine. I do it all the time with Karcie on our way home.”

I had to admit, it did sound pretty cool to double it up and try riding a board, but my stomach still felt a little queasy at the thought of it.

“Maybe next time,” I said. I probably sounded like a wuss.

Laura shrugged and attached the board leash like she had on the way over. It was starting to get a little dark out, but Laura convinced me that it was safer to walk through Irvine Park again than on the sidewalks.

“So, you’re really into inventing stuff?” I said, trying to distract myself from the unsettling shadows of the perfectly sculpted trees.

“Yeah!” Laura said, and her eyes shined. “I started tinkering with stuff, like my digipad and computer cube, and it turned out I was super good at it. Every modification I made was so cool, and really complicated. Then I started coming up with new ideas, and well, you’ve seen those. They’re awesome.”

I remembered Joi’s message and thought that she might be on to something about Laura being so full of herself. All her ideas in class were great, so maybe she deserved to brag a little bit.

“Your jacket’s pretty cool,” I said.

“Thanks. It was actually Mrs. Yismin who inspired the idea.” Laura said, and she tugged at a brown lock. “She’s always complaining about how it’s too cold in the winter, and too hot in the summer to carry around her big coat. I sorta wanted to make it for her.”

Usually during her presentations, Laura talks about the profit her inventions could make. I wonder why Laura has such a strong sympathy for the homeless at that shelter. It was sweet of her, but in the end, I still thought she would probably sell her idea anyway.

“I guess it’s not done though,” I said.

“I just haven’t tested it yet. But it works. Or I think so, at least.” Laura punched a button on the device attached to the sleeve. I remembered it was the temperature control. “After class, Cyl said he thought my work had some holes in it. I’m pretty sure it’s all right though. Wanna see?”

“I thought you just said it hadn’t been tested yet.”

“There’s a first for everything. Why not now?” Laura pushed a couple more buttons on the screen.

“We’re supposed to use test dummies, right?” I said.

“When we’re at school, yes. But we’re not at school. I test my stuff on myself all the time,” Laura said, and pulled the zipper all the way up to her neck. “Here we go.”

I was able to relax a little, knowing that this isn’t the first time she used herself as a guinea pig. Nonetheless, my palms felt sticky with sweat. Laura bit her lip and pulled down on the sleeves. She closed her eyes, and wrinkled her nose.

“I’m feeling warmer. I think,” she said. “It works! I knew it.”

“Does it keep you cool? Like if you go on a run or something?”

“Of course! I’ll show you.” Laura made a downward swiping motion on the screen.

“Whoa, the temperature is already changing. I’d show you, but you aren’t supposed to feel it from the outside.”

She smiled so widely that I couldn’t help feeling glad for her. She had a great idea, and in this day and age, if your great ideas work, then you’re bound to be a valued inventor. She won’t get the slice of humble pie that she needs, but she seemed so genuinely thrilled when she succeeded.

Laura let out a celebratory laugh, but she cut it short. Her smile faded into a look of confusion and she held up her arm so she could see the screen better.

“That’s weird,” she mumbled.

“What’s weird? What’s wrong?” I said.

“What is it...? Oh, geeze.” Laura used her free arm to rub across her abdomen.

“What’s going on? What is it?” I said, and I felt a pit in my stomach start to form.

“It’s fine. The screen is just...” Laura said, but her voice shook and her teeth clicked together.

“Is it malfunctioning?” I said.

“I think so. I’m getting really, really cold,” Laura said, and started rubbing her arm faster.

“Oh my god! Turn it off,” I said.

“I tried, but it isn’t responding,” Laura said, and she started pushing buttons on the device faster and harder than before.

“Take it off then,” I said. Laura yanked at the zipper, but it didn’t budge. I felt the pit in my stomach grow two sizes and shoot into my esophagus.

“Oh god,” Laura said, looked at the screen again, then stared at me with wide eyes. “It says the temperature is going up.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” I said, and followed it up with a sigh.

“No, like, way up.”

I lunged forward and grabbed the top of the jacket with one hand and the zipper with the other, and pulled with everything I had. It must have been caught on a bit of string, so I turned the collar inside out.

“I can’t breathe,” Laura said. “I can’t see.” Laura’s hands were on her head, and she was starting to lean to one side.

“Oh no! Cycro! Cycro!” Cycro had floated off to chase a butterfly, and wasn’t able to hear commands. I smashed my forefinger into the red button on my wrist repeatedly. He turned, and casually headed my way. “Hurry up, you stupid robot,” I said under my breath. Laura fell to the ground and was shivering again.

“Call an ambulance!” I yelled when he was in earshot. He stopped dead, and his eye lights turned to empty circles. His claw started punching numbers into the screen of his chest. He looked a little freaked out, but the task was simple enough for him to handle.

“How are you feeling? You look cold now,” I said, took notice of her chattering teeth, and knelt beside her.

“Freezing... it hurts...” she said, and her eyes were squeezed tight.

I grabbed the bottom of her jacket and pulled up. The tight fabric only made it halfway up her waist before it couldn’t be pulled any more. My heart was racing and I too was starting to feel a little faint. I didn’t know what else to do, but I couldn’t just sit and wait for help to arrive. My arms compelled me to push up her sleeves or keep tugging at the zipper. Anything that

made me feel like I was helping, even though I knew none of it mattered until that jacket came off.

By the time the ambulance came flying around the corner and the EMTs ran up to us with a stretcher, Laura had already fallen unconscious. Two EMTs lifted her onto the gurney, while a third brandished a pair of scissors to cut open the fabric.

“Your AIPA told us most of what happened, but he couldn’t tell us all the details,” said a police officer with a digipad and an AIPA floating behind him. “He kept making static so we couldn’t understand everything he said.”

“Is she going to be okay?” I asked. I was starting to breathe easier knowing Laura’s safety was out of my hands.

“I can’t say. She’s going to have to go to the hospital,” the officer said. “Could you tell me what happened?”

The EMT’s were rolling Laura into the back of the ambulance, and I didn’t feel right letting her go to the hospital alone.

“Wait, I want to go with her!” I stepped past the officer and lunged toward the ambulance. The cop put a hand on my shoulder to hold me back.

“I’ll give you a ride to the hospital,” he said. “You can sit in the back with my AIPA and let him take a record of what happened.

I agreed and motioned for Cycro to follow. The poor little robot had never been in an emergency situation, and was frozen hovering in one spot. I could tell he was a little overwhelmed because his eye lights were still open circles. I reached out to him and took him in my arms.

“If that were me, you’d be absolutely useless, wouldn’t you,” I said.

“I’m sorry, Jane. My emotional interface—*krrzt* is—*krrzt* a learning mechanism, and I’ve ne—*krrzt*. Never had—*krrzt* to maintain panic before. I—*krrzt*. I’ll do better next time,” he said. His voice sounded steady, but I attributed that to the broken modifier. I could tell he was scared though, because his static was getting more and more frequent. No wonder the operator couldn’t understand anything he was saying.

“Don’t worry, Cycro. You did great,” I said. “I’ll let you pull yourself together.” I touched the button below his chest screen and put him in sleep mode.

When I got in the back of the police car, I placed Cycro in my lap. The cop’s AIPA hovered over the seat next to me, asked me questions about the incident, and took notes on his chest screen.

The AIPA sitting at the desk in the ER waiting room told me that Laura’s doctor wasn’t permitting visitors. I told myself I’d wait for another half hour before asking to go back again. Nobody told me anything about her condition, and I couldn’t get my heart rate to go down. I hugged Cycro to my chest, and tried not to think about her. I was so afraid that she might not make it ok, that she was exposed to the extreme temperatures for too long. Especially since the jacket was supposed to change the temperature of her skin, not just feel warm against her skin.

Laura’s a kind girl. She thinks she is so amazing, but she isn’t wrong. She’s different, and that makes her special. Nobody wants to be just like everyone else; even the AIPAs have their own quirks and personalities. Cycro is a goofy coward, and I love him for that. Laura is no different. She’s a little haughty, and refuses to take suggestions, but she’s got a sweet side, and can imagine the most incredible things and make them a reality. I just hoped she was okay. If

she kept up with her insane ways, like doubling up on her skim board, this wouldn't be her last visit to the ER.

I touched the button below Cycro's chest screen again, and his eyes lit up to show two filled in circles. They turned into half-moons when he saw me.

"How are you feeling now, sleepyhead?" I said.

"Much better now, Jane. Is there anything you want me to—*krrzt* do for you?" he said.

"No, I just wanted to check in."

"How is Miss Laura?" He said, swiveling his head side to side.

"Don't know yet."

Cycro opened a game of checkers on his chest screen to keep me entertained while we waited. I thought he might be able to tell how worried I was, because he kept asking if I needed anything from him. I said no, but it felt good to have the little guy looking after me. After several minutes, a metallic pink AIPA floated up to us.

"Excuse me, sugar. Miss Audax is ready for visitors, now. Her parents are on their way, so you can go check in on her until they get here." She had one of the sweetest AIPA voices I'd ever heard. Probably to soothe the family and friends of patients.

"Is she doing all right?" I said, and stood up.

"Oh honey, she is going to be just fine. Right this way."

I followed her down a long, brightly lit, white hallway until we reached a large room with no door that had two machines covered in buttons. Laura was sitting up in a bed, and smiled when she saw me come in.

"Hey," she said. She looked tired.

"Hi, I don't mean to disturb you," I said, and took seat next to her bed.

“No, I feel great,” she said.

“I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Never better,” she said, and gave a weak laugh. “Thanks for sticking around.”

“Of course!” I said. “That’s what friends do.”

Reflection

Over the course of writing these four short stories, I gathered a lot of information and insight about how the societies of the times behaved toward certain personality traits. I began this process by writing the story in the modern time period, because it is the era I am most familiar with. As I wrote that story, I was able to figure out the format of my writing, how I wanted the characters to interact, and their overall role from era to era. I wrote this story in first person because, while the central character is Laura, I wanted to get into Jane's head and really understand how Jane would react to the perspectives of herself and those surrounding her. The stories center around Laura although she is not the narrator, so I compared Jane's character to Nick Caraway from *The Great Gatsby* to better understand the perspective she would need to have in order to properly tell Laura's story.

After writing from a modern perspective, I decided that I would continue writing the stories in order, going from the farthest past and ending in the future. I started reading and watching other books and movies set in the 1850s to immerse myself into the perspectives of people from that society, which I also did for the 1920s. As I was writing these two stories, I noticed that people were starting to learn how to view others personalities from an individual perspective, and they were not just simply buying in to whatever society told them to think.

After the first three stories were written, I devised a timeline chart to illustrate the overall opinions of each of Laura's six traits over time. The trend was that society was starting to accept Laura's traits that had previously been considered negative, with the exception of arrogance and stubbornness. I used this information to guide the setup of how people in the 2100's would view and accept Laura's personality.

In the end, I learned that people are starting to rely on their own ideas instead of blindly accepting the voice of society. This new mindset has resulted in a more accepting and understanding world. In the 1850s, it was vitally important to conduct yourself according to the rules and expectations of society, but in modern times, most of those rules have become arbitrary. This lack of structure has made it more possible for people to express their individuality, and learn to accept others for it. Based off this information, I believe that the future can only continue the upward trajectory of improvement. There is the chance that history could repeat itself, but I have hope that people have learned from the mistakes of previous eras, and can acquire total acceptance of different personalities.

I wrote this collection of stories in hopes that it will be read by pre-teens and teenagers. Middle school and high school are difficult times in a young reader's life, and I hope that my stories can give them insight about the acceptance of people who are a little out of the ordinary. My work has a positive outlook on where the social world is headed, and I hope that it encourages the younger generations to step up and challenge the negative ideas that society has against certain personality traits.

This project has not only given me an insight about the progression of the individual versus society, but it has helped better my skills as a writer. Before this project, I had never attempted writing a short story. I had always been intimidated by resolving a storyline within a limited number of pages, and writing four short stories in succession has been the first step to conquering that fear. I have a better understanding of my capabilities, and I have learned a lot about managing pacing, setting, and characterization within a fifteen-page piece.

In order to get in the mindset of each time period, I read the works of other authors to get better acquainted with the voice and language of that time period. I found that I would use

imitation to develop my own voice within that time period. For example, I re-read parts of Jane Austen's to understand the language of the Victorian era. While I was writing my story set in the 1850's, I realized that a lot of my writing mimicked Austen's. I found this to be a useful technique in exploring new areas of writing, and a fantastic foundation for developing my own voice.

This set of stories has the potential to be extended into a longer piece. What I had originally hoped I could do with this idea was to produce a novel with multiple parts. However, considering most novels aren't written in a year, especially for beginning writers, I didn't expect that would be possible for this project. In my future revisions, I hope to extend the length of each chapter in order to get an even better grasp of who Laura is and what each world thinks of her. I also hope to add another part, perhaps set in the Middle Ages, to explore the cultural changes even further. Additionally, I think that the futuristic section could stand to be more substantial than the previous eras, because that is where the greatest impact is held. I want to thoroughly cover each aspect of Laura's personality and make sure the reader understands that Jane has developed a voice of her own and trusts in her personal opinions.

I never could have created a complete set of short stories within such a short time frame without the contributions of Dr. Philip Frana, Dr. Thomas Martin, and Dr. Bryan Saville. Each professor contributed to my project in different ways, and I am grateful for their assistance. Dr. Martin read and critiqued my stories from a literary perspective, and provided me with advice to ground the setting, manage my pacing, and provide me with valuable writing instruction. Dr. Saville assisted with the psychological portion of my project, such as portraying Laura's characteristics in a believable manner, and the behavioral analysis of Jane and other surrounding characters. Dr. Frana, my advisor, provided me with insight about the different time periods, and

how the historical setting affected the actions and thoughts of each character. He helped organize my ideas, plot a timeline for my work, and guide my thoughts about societal transformation.

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