

Missing Stars: *Overture*

A NEW DAY

Ela Sahin

Ela awoke five minutes before the alarm, eyeing the old-fashioned clock with a hint of reluctance.

The sun hadn't quite risen yet, but the light breaking over the horizon outside her window was enough to see by anyway, bathing her room in a pale bluish glow. She clicked off the alarm just before it rang, feet hanging off her bedframe as she cleared her head.

Today was Friday, the twentieth of September. Breakfast would be served in one hour, followed by classes an hour later. Next week she had a French exam, and next *month*...

The gala.

"Gala." The word alone was enough to bring a smile to Ela's face. Not just a *dance*, not a *ball*, not a *party*, but a *gala*. It sounded so refined, so *regal*. Like she was a princess just for having received the invitation. And she got to *organize* it!

She allowed her excitement to burn away the remnants of sleep, clicking on her lamp and straightening out her covers before sitting at the table in her room, pulling a small notebook towards her, a mechanical pencil tucked neatly into its spine.

Of course, it was going to be difficult making time for the preparations alongside her studies, responsibilities as the Student President, and numerous after-school activities, but... *gala!*

Ela tapped the pencil absentmindedly against her daily planner as she pondered just where her priorities should lie. Sacrifices were going to have to be made *somewhere*. There was a block of free time she *could* allocate to the gala, but the faculty had made it clear she was to reserve some time for herself—an understandable stance, if not one she *agreed* with right now.

With a deep sigh and a heavy hand, she neatly crossed out 'art club', replacing it with 'gala preparations', and added a post-it note to the planner, reminding her to inform the art club that she would be missing a few sessions.

As for the rest of the day... the usual assortment of classes, a check-in with her therapist, Student Council meetings, and a study session with a few struggling students who had asked for her tutelage. She would have to begin recruiting help during lunch, and coordinating the efforts with the staff.

Another glance at the clock informed her she was a little behind in her daily preparations, so she snapped the planner shut, slid the pencil back into place, and opened her closet, where a fresh uniform was waiting for her to start a new day.

HARD WORK

Jeanne Lefevre

Jeanne didn't even have to look at her phone to figure out who was calling her. It was the sixth time in less than two hours.

Hurriedly putting down a box of small enamel paint cans and liquid thinners, she took out the device from her pocket and checked the mysterious caller's name on the screen. Her doubts confirmed, she heaved out a weary sigh.

“Uhm, Joachim?” she said, tapping the shoulder of the sandy-haired boy beside her, “can you take these paints to Mr. Renner ahead of me? I just have to answer this call.”

“Sure thing, Prez!” answered Joachim, with a sly wink as he lifted the hefty box and carries it under his arm. “Anything for you.” Giving her a big, dramatic salute, he turned on his heel and headed for the door with an equally big and dramatic stride.

As soon as she was certain her clubmate was out of earshot, she took the call. “Mom?”

“[Jeanne, my dear! What’ve you been doing? I’ve been trying to call you since early this morning; you told me you’d call, didn’t you?]”

Jeanne scratched the side of her face—this conversation was something she also knew she’d be having as soon as she heard her ringtone playing. “[I’m sorry, Mom. We were really busy. We’re working on our booth props and décor right now. I’m okay so far; don’t worry.]”

“[Did you get enough sleep last night?]”

“[Mom...]”

“[Have you taken your meds? You have an appointment with your therapist today, right? Have you already gone there? —]”

“[Mom—]”

“[Are you still on your period—]”

“[Mom!]”

“[But Jeanne—]”

“[Mom, I’m fine. Really. I’m doing fine. I slept well. I’ve met with my therapist already. Just calm down, okay?]”

“[But...]” her mother interjected, prefacing another line of argument that, much to Jeanne’s relief, didn’t come.

“[I’m sorry I wasn’t able to call. We just had a lot to do since this morning.]”

“[I... I see. Alright. But Jeanne! Tell me if there’s anything you need help with, okay? Your father and I are worried...]”

“[O-Okay,]” Jeanne answered. She wanted to say “don’t be,” but she knew that that would make her mother worry even more.

After a short chat just to tell her mom what’d been going on with her club activities, Jeanne finally hung up, more than a little relieved the ordeal was over.

“Hm, are we not short on lights, Hannah?” she asked, returning to the room, as she crouched over and rummaged through a cardboard box of tinted lightbulbs. Around her, the other Astronomy club members frisked hurriedly to and fro, flooding the clubroom with a chaotic medley of sounds that easily drowned out her words.

“I uh, think—ow! Watch it, Yakov!—we’ve got enough lights here!” Hannah cried out over the din from the other end of the room, while she made her way in the ever-increasingly busy room to Jeanne.

“I see! That’s good, then!” Jeanne answered, snapping her fingers and giving an acknowledging nod to the short, curly-haired girl who’s presently struggling to carry a towering stack of colorful flyers. “As for that, you can go assign some of the boys to start distributing them on the school grounds. Chop chop!”

“Gotcha,” said Hannah, who then waved over some of the boys chatting idly in a circle at the corner of the room, “Hey, Gordon! Jean-Philippe! Come help here, please!”

Jeanne lifted herself up and dusted her skirt. “By the way, have you seen Isolda anywhere?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah, yeah! She was here a little bit; she was talking with Stella, giving her some instructions, I think. I didn’t hear very clearly. And well, after that she just Isolda’d out on us.”

“R-Right.”

Isolda’d out. It’s her first time hearing the phrase, but she didn’t need any help deciphering what it meant—God knows how many times she’d seen the concept in action in her time knowing the girl who inspired the eponym. It didn’t surprise her in the slightest, either; in fact, she thought anyone would’ve seen it coming from miles away. An understandable plight it was too, especially since even she herself was beginning to find the crowded room and the hectic flurry of activity within to be a bit suffocating and overwhelming. Going out for a little bit of fresh air right now wouldn’t be too bad, she thought.

First making sure that they had sufficient materials and tools, Jeanne excused herself and headed out into the corridor and to the vending machine at the end of the hallway, eyes alertly on the lookout for her missing friend. She didn’t have to search long, thankfully, because Isolda, just as she’d hoped, was there, her back against the wall, nibbling on a large sandwich.

“Good morning, Isolda. How are you?” Jeanne said with a smile.

Isolda nodded. "I'm fine, Jeanne, thank you. And how about you? Are you fine?"

"I just took a break. Hannah's taking good care of stuff anyway, and there isn't much for me left to do, at least for now. I wanted to look for you."

"It was getting crowded in the club. I don't know many of the people there. They were so loud, too."

"I see."

"Are you angry?"

"No, I understand what you mean," Jeanne laughed reassuringly, "I recognize some of those guys there, though. I assume they're from the newspaper club, since they asked me for a short interview and some photos. Some are new Astronomy club members, and a few I remember to be inactive ones."

"I'd like to think that the festive spirit got them into a productive mood, but I know they're just in it for the extra credit."

"I told Stella not to let them touch the telescope."

"Of course," Jeanne agreed. Isolda's protectiveness of her beloved telescope was something all Astronomy Club members knew very well. Indeed, it could even be called a miracle that she even agreed to let it be used for the open house event.

Except it's not, Jeanne thought as she fed a crisp bill into the vending machine. She knew better more than anyone how much Isolda loved the Astronomy Club, how enviably dedicated she is

to the subject. In passion and knowledge alone, she was aware how much Isolda's overwhelmingly overshadowed her own. If only the former weren't so timid and, well, so prone to *Isolda-ing out*, she'd probably—nay, certainly—make a much better club president than Jeanne.

Jeanne now scanned the selection of available kinds of sandwiches on the machine.

"The pulled pork sandwich is good," Isolda volunteered. "You should try it. I am eating one."

Jeanne grimaced. The sandwich in Isolda's hands certainly looked scrumptious and also had a wonderfully delicious smell, and that alone was almost enough to coax her into agreeing.

Almost, she thought with a smile, *but not quite*.

The truth is, she'd been trying to limit her calorie intake for the week, and so far, she was sure she was faring amazingly with this regimen, much to her own surprise and amazement. Meat, especially red meat, is definitely out of the question—and she owed it to herself not to ruin her perfect streak. After all, if there's something being the Astronomy Club president taught her, it's that self-discipline and self-control are invaluable traits to have in life.

...

And so, she bought two sandwiches. Just this one time would be okay, right? Surely, no one would blame her if she ate two veggie sandwiches instead of the tempting pulled pork ones.

"Are you thinking about something?" Isolda asked, her gaze nonetheless untorn from her food.

"Huh?"

“That’s what you look like when you’re thinking about something. What are you thinking?”

“Ah, I—” Jeanne faltered with the reply, as if to consider dismissing Isolda’s hypothesis for a brief moment. However, the lie quickly dissipated into an amused, but somewhat tired smile before she could say anything. If there’s anyone worth telling her thoughts to, it’s Isolda.

“Well, actually, there’s one thing,” she sighed, biting into her sandwich. “My mom’s been calling a lot again.”

“I see,” Isolda nodded, her tone impassive, but Jeanne knew she was listening intently.

“In fact, she just called me earlier, you know? Asked a lot of questions. Have I met with my therapist, have I taken my meds, that kind of thing.”

“It’s almost as if I’d choke to death on a candy if she took her eyes off me for a second. Like I were a baby or something.”

“Are you... angry about that?”

“Angry...” Jeanne pondered, using the pause to take a deep breath, snap her fingers, and recollect her thoughts, “well, not *angry*, but a bit, like, frustrated, I think? I’m not a kid anymore.”

Jeanne loved her parents, that much was sure, but she knew she could do well with far less of their babying. Her hard work at the Astronomy Club was proof of that.

“Oh, hey! Jeanne! Isolda!” a voice rang from the other end of the hallway. A girl with long, wavy hair and a red cap was jogging up to them, drops of sweat running down her face, gasping like a fish out of water. “Do you have... some time... to spare... right now?”

“Oh, hey Ela! What’s the matter?”

Ela pulled out a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her face, taking a few moments to catch her breath to try and sound more dignified than a dying horse. “Mr. Bosworth told me to help decorate the auditorium today. We’re mostly done, but we’re short on hands right now. We need the banners there up this evening.”

“Um, well, we’re already about to head back to our classes after this, but...” Jeanne faltered, eyes straying to Isolda, who, as she expected, did not seem entirely comfortable with Ela’s arrival.

“I... I see! No worries! How about this afternoon? We really do need more people!”

Jeanne snapped her fingers. *Here’s a dilemma*, she thought. Jeanne didn’t want to turn Ela down, but at the same time, Isolda had just gotten out of the mess at the Astronomy Club, and Jeanne knew better than to force her back into another similar situation.

Ela quickly perceived the root of Jeanne’s hesitation. “Ah, don’t worry, Isolda,” she assured her with a bright smile, “there’s not going to be a lot of us there. Currently it’s just me, Marguerite, and Irene. Renee said she’d come later, but I guess she’s been held up negotiating with the zoo. We wanted to invite them to hold an exhibition during open house for the IC kids, but uh...”

Jeanne smiled. “That’d be great, in that case, but, I guess it’s up to Isolda in the end. What do you think, Isolda?”

The girl still didn’t look too convinced.

BE NORMAL

Isolda Gaillard

Isolda stood dumbfounded under the piercing gazes of the two girls.

She could hear words from a far-off memory whisper in her ear as clear as day.

"Just be normal."

She tried to respond quickly, in a "normal" kind of way, but what would be normal in this situation?

What would be a normal that would make Jeanne happy?

Her view began to sink inward, and soon the world began to unknowingly warp into her own subconscious.

Did she have to make Ela happy to make Jeanne happy?

Was she taking too long to think?

What was the question again?

"Why can't she just be normal?"

Their glares were becoming sharper, harsher from the looks of it. They were beginning to hate her.

No.

Hate was too strong of a word. Jeanne could never hate her, because she'd tell her if she hated her. They had made a rule about that.

She began to breathe a fraction slower, but would they notice that?

"Isolda?" Ela called out, attempting to coax her back into the present moment.

But the words only made Isolda tense more, and shrink back further.

She had taken too long to think, and now she was making things awkward.

They wouldn't want her around.

She saw the harsh faces of Ela and the other girls hard at work, their diligence only interrupted to turn away as she approached.

"Why is she even here?"

"Can't she take a hint?"

"Why can't she just be normal?"

She's 12 and now holding a ball, the auditorium shifting into the view of school courtyard.

(How do you be normal?)

She tried to say the words but they already were walking away, deciding once again to give up on her.

She tried to find Jeanne in the memory, only to be met with empty faces all turned away.

It's her fault that she doesn't stand out.

It's her own fault that they're leaving.

What did she need to do?

Would Jeanne be upset if she didn't go?

"We don't want you to sit here." An old friend whispered at an outdoor table.

Would she become friends with someone else?

"I'm sorry Ela," Jeanne began.

The words stung.

Panic began to set in quick, but she forced herself to hide the physical need to scream deep down within.

It hurt, but people hate it when you scream.

"I don't think it'd-"

Don't scream.

"-be good for us to-"

But say something.

"Thinking." Isolda cut in quickly, cutting Jeanne off midsentence.

From the quiet outburst the two girls turned back her way.

Piercing eyes.

Was she doing the right thing? Did it matter at this point?

"I was thinking. It took me a while. I'm sorry."

Ela spoke out first, sending her words out alongside a gentle smile.

"That's quite alright, Isolda. Are you comfortable with helping out?" Ela asked.

I don't know.

"You know you don't have to-" Jeanne tried to cut in, but Isolda's words quickly spoke over her.

"Yes." Isolda quickly answered. "I'll go. I'm OK to go."

Instantly Ela breathed out a sigh of relief. "That's good to hear, nice to know I don't have to run around for the next hour trying to wrangle other people."

Without missing a beat Ela added on, "Not that I don't appreciate you guys specifically coming to help. With the two of you we'll be in good company!"

“Are you still OK to wait for us to finish up class? It seems like you have a lot on your plate.”
Jeanne asked.

Ela waved her hands dismissively still smiling, “It’s quite alright for me to wait for you guys. Like I said earlier we are almost done, I just didn’t want to continue whipping the others like a slaver. Two more hands will go a long way.”

“They... let you whip them?” Isolda asked, her voice lowering into a whisper and instantly not getting the laugh that started escaping from Ela's mouth.

“Oh no no it’s just an expression, I wasn’t actually- you know.” She turned her gaze over to Jeanne for a little support, who was now nudging Isolda softly to shoot her a reassuring smile.

“No one’s whipping anybody. In fact, it will be fun to have you along.”

...

Isolda couldn’t place why Ela was laughing, or even place why her being there would be fun. Her mind was all over the place and at times it felt impossible to organize it.

Yet her best friend was right beside her and smiling.

It was an expression that she didn’t need to overthink.

In that moment: everything was okay. Isolda smiled.

“It will be fun to go. Thanks.”

CONVICTION

Natalya Volkova/Sofiya Volkova

A wise man once said, "An opinion is something that you uphold; a conviction is something that holds you up." An opinion is something that you can afford to throw around, like a common rock in a vast ocean of innumerable others, but conviction is a shining gem, a crowning jewel -- something worth fighting for, something worth living for. It takes as many forms and faces as there are stars in this universe, yet despite that, whenever you see it, you can still clearly recognize it from the shimmering fire that it lights in the eyes of those who have it.

For Natalya Petrovna Volkova, it's that pineapple *does* go on pizza, and you can be damn sure she's going to make her sister acknowledge that.

"[You see, Sonechka, it's all about how the flavors work with each other! Like an orchestra!]" she said, biting into a sandwich, easing herself onto a bench by the wayside, "[You've got to appreciate the subtle . . . nu-an-ces? Is that the word? Yeah, that! The nuances in the taste—oh! The wind feels so good here!]"

"[Nuance, my foot!]" Sofiya countered, sitting beside her sister, "[The flavor's too strong! The pineapple takes so much away from the rest of the pizza, you know!]"

"[It doesn't, Sonechka! You're just eating it wrong!]"

"[Eh? What's with that kind of logic? If that's how you want to play it, then I could say the same to you, you know?]"

"[But... but! It does go on pizza! It does! I swear it, I swear it!]"

"[No, it doesn't—]"

Sofiya's retort was cut short by the ringing of the phone in her pocket. She fished it out, and Natalya wriggled closer to her, checking the name flashing on the phone with a curious stare.

"[It's just Fran calling,]" Sofiya said.

As Sofiya had expected, as soon as she tapped the "Accept" button, the same roaring, husky chain-smoker voice came blasting like a siren from the other side of the line — which had got to be one hell of a feat, considering she hadn't even turned the loudspeaker on yet.

"Hey, dearies! How're you guys doing? I'm in town, taking my hog for a ride, so really sorry I didn't make it to lunch! I promise I'll make it up to you guys tomorrow, okay?"

"A... *hog*? Whaaaat? Miss Fran!" Natalya's jaw dropped open, her eyes set a-glimmer in ecstatic surprise as she jerked Sofiya's phone to her side, "Miss Fran, is true? You are riding a hog to the town?! Where is it? Where is it? Can I to see? That is *OINKredible!* Name it Vasya, name it Vasya, okay? That is so cute, I—"

"Oh! Natalya! Hey there! Er, sorry to crush your hopes, love, but it's not a literal pig I'm talking about. 'Hog' is just a word we use for motorcycles. Slang, you know? All that stuff. You've seen Kristin already, yeah? That's my Zundapp."

"O-Oh! Kristin, you say!" said Natalya, "That is terrible to hear. I have always been wanting to be riding a pig." She let out an inaudible sigh, looking like cold water washed off the exuberance on her face a few seconds ago.

"Well, I'm sure you'll get your chance sometime, dear. You never know what fate's gonna throw your way just around the corner, yeah?"

“That’s right—oh yes! Miss Fran!”

“Yes, sugar tits?”

“Now that you’re here, can you also be of telling Sonechka that pineapple *does* go on pizza? She tells me it does not! She’s wrong, da? I tell her, she won’t believe!”

The left-field question caught Fran off-guard, but she nonetheless took a while humming to herself as if in deep deliberation. After a minute or so, she triumphantly spoke out:

“Ah, fuck it! What does it matter? Pineapples, no pineapples, they’re both good to me! Are you going to treat me to one?”

“No, that’s not fair!” cried Natalya, horrified that Fran would even dare think of striking a happy medium, “You can’t of doing that, Miss Fran! It is *war*! You can’t *not* pick side!” she protested, trying to sound as threatening and pressuring as humanly possible. Fran just barked out an amused snort in response. Apparently, the combination of her small voice and thick accent didn’t really come off as fearsome as she would’ve liked.

Sofiya took this moment to pull her arm back to herself. “So, what’re you doing right now, anyway?”

“Ah? *Moi*? Well, aside from the unenviable daily task of staying gorgeous, nothing much, really. Earned another remedial class in Math today, by the way, and it’s *you* guys’ fault for coercing me into going to Chez Gazpacho yesterday.”

“I did not hear you to be complaining at all back there.”

“Hah! Well, okay, I won’t deny that one, but aren’t you at least going to *ask* if I need help with my academic troubles? Because I do! Man, differential calculus is *torture*, I tell you!”

“I’m not going to do your homework again, if that’s what you’re hoping for.”

“Ah, dang it!” Fran groaned, the energy in her voice plunging at this cold, swift preemptive refusal, “I thought we had something special among us three! And oh, speaking of classes, this reminds me!”

“Hm? What is it now?”

“I heard my class is going to have a new student this week. A transferee from Switzerland, that is.”

“Oh? Switzerland, eh? That does sound interesting.”

Natalya lunged toward her sister, trying to wrest control of the phone once more, “Switzerland! I’ve not been to Switzerland! Is it sweet place? You think they have neighbor country called *SOURzerland* too?”

“Haha! I don’t know the details yet, but I’ll keep you posted on that one. I’ll even try to introduce them to you if they happen to be hot, how’s that? That is, if I manage to, you know, not accidentally seduce them, haha!”

“That is hard task to do, I imagine,” Sofiya nodded, her smile dripping with sarcasm.

“You betcha! Anyway, I think I’ve gotta be going. I’ll catch up with you guys tomorrow lunch. That cool?”

“Huh. Okay then.”

A short, sharp beep signaled the end of their little chat, and Sofiya pocketed her phone.

“[Riding a pig to school would’ve been awesome,]” Natalya mused, paddling her legs in the air like a kid.

“[Said literally no one else except you, Natasha,]” answered Sofiya, “[and besides, while we’re on the topic already, did *you* manage to do your homework yesterday? I saw you were still online at 2 in the morning. Don’t tell me you—]”

The question had dissipated into the cool afternoon wind before she could finish it--Natalya fidgeting with the tips of her golden hair with a wry, rigid smile on her lips couldn’t be any of a clearer answer to it even if it tried. Sofiya crossed her arms in annoyance.

“[You know Mom and Dad won’t like to hear that, yeah?]”

“[But, Sonechka! The lessons are so difficult! Math is so difficult! Everything is so, so, difficult! I don’t understand the topics at all!]”

“[If that’s so, then you should try asking your classmates for help, right? I remember meeting Sam and that other girl, Franziska. They look nice.]”

Natalya seemed to tense up a bit at this, and her smile somehow managed to become even stiffer than before. It’s not a really obvious shift in expression, but Sofiya’d always been good at detecting and interpreting her twin’s body language, from the grandest gestures to the subtlest twitches. Having nearly two decades of experience in dealing with her would do that.

“[Well, yes, they were very nice, but I’m . . .]” Natalya’s eyes dart around as if trying to find the right words out of the air around them, “[. . . it’s hard to put this into words, but, I’m still not all that comfortable talking with them.]”

“[Huh. And why’s that?]”

“[Well, just that, you see, my English still isn’t very good, yeah? At least, not good enough to the point that I can confidently talk with them for a long time. I’m always thinking, ‘what if I mess up and make a lot of mistakes?’ They might make fun of me. I don’t want that.]”

“[We managed to befriend Fran, and she didn’t make fun of our English.]”

Natalya bit her thumb, pondering. “[But you know Miss Fran’s different, Sonechka. Like, *very* different.]”

“[Er, well... what I mean is... ah, okay. I’ll give you that one, but my point still stands. If you keep thinking that you don’t belong with these people, then you might indeed never will. It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy.]”

“[I can’t always be with you, you know? Neither can Fran, given how she usually is. You need to try making friends of your own accord, or else you’ll be spending a lot of your time here alone.]”

“[I understand that...]”

“[Can you promise me you’ll try talking with your classmates tomorrow?]”

Natalya faltered before answering, possibly wrestling with that one part of her mind that still wants to say no, but ended up giving a short nod of agreement nonetheless. Thankfully, that was enough for her sister, who smiled approvingly in return.

“[Oh, wait!]” Sofiya exclaimed, “[Now talk about a golden opportunity!]”

Sofiya’s features lit up upon seeing a pair of girls in the distance, happily talking with each other as they walk down the paved pathway. One of them, Natalya saw, was a short, pudgy bespectacled girl with silky, dark hair in a bob cut, and the other was a much taller, lither young lady with long hair tied up in a messy ponytail—and neither of them was a person she recognized. Her brows furrowed in confusion.

“[What... about them, Sonechka?]”

“[I recognize those two. I ran into them this morning, chatted a little. I forgot their names, but do try talking to them! It’s a good chance to make friends! Use the puns you’ve been researching all this time, if need be!]”

Natalya nearly gagged on her sandwich. “[W-What do you mean? I couldn’t possibly—]”

“[You promised me, didn’t you, Natasha? Look, they sat on a bench. Makes it all the easier for you, too!]”

“[But you only asked me to try ‘tomorrow,]” Natalya muttered in between a pout, in a last-ditch effort to dodge the prospect.

“[Anything worth doing tomorrow is worth doing today! Come on!]”

Sofiya jumped up from her seat and tugged at her twin's arm invitingly, putting on the warmest, most encouraging smile she could. Natalya fidgeted a little more, before sighing in resignation and lifting herself up.

"[Okay. I guess I'll do it...]"

"[What's with that tone? Say it with more conviction!]"

"[I-I'll do it, Sonechka!]"

"[Excellent! Let's go!]"

Natalya bit her lip, hoping against hope that sheer conviction will hold her up throughout this looming tribulation.

SAY YES

Annaliese Koell

Bright. Beautiful. Glamorous. Sparkling with life and color and youthful extravagance, brimming with all sorts of fun and smiles and memories, suffusing the air in happy chatter and laughter and the rousing feeling of childish impetuosity. Everyone's running and rushing every which way, handing out gaudy flyers, frolicking with their friends, and generally just enjoying the feverishly festive mood that'd recently begun taking over the school.

Even through her headphones and over the loud music blasting in her ears drowning out the cacophony of the busy world around her, Annaliese couldn't just help but *feel* the "gala week" spirit in the atmosphere, and *by God*, did she hate it.

Annaliese leafed through the French textbook sitting on her lap, trying to find the page today's homework activity was on. Under normal circumstances, Mr. Köhler wouldn't be able to pay her enough to make her bother accomplishing his boring assignments like she's doing now, but she figured reviewing this French verb conjugation thing, complicated and tedious though it might be, was a far better alternative than, say, helping out with her class doing prep work for their open house day booth.

After all, why expend energy doing things for an event you're not going to and aren't wanted in anyway?

It's much better like this. Maybe this way she could even get a passing score from Mr. Köhler the next time he holds a surprise quiz.

She's far from alone in that sentiment. The school being what it is, attendance in the festivities isn't compulsory, and quite a number of students do opt not to participate in them—or at least, not all of them. Some only try out the booths during open house or eat during the formal dinner event, but a lot skip out on the big dance at the end of the week. However, there are also some like her who, for their own different reasons, elect to spend the weekend on their own. And having passed on the festival for two years now, Annaliese had come to feel like something of an expert in being a buzzkill. Skipping yet another one's a piece of cake.

She did, however, understand why a large fraction of the students still looked forward to the event. No matter how short, it's nonetheless a welcome respite from the grueling demands of schoolwork, and it's also a rare chance to bond with friends and classmates in other, more fun ways than commiserating with each other over how mind-numbingly, soul-crushingly difficult their chemistry and calculus exams are. Add to that, the gala's also a golden opportunity for girls to dress up in glamorous clothes, dancing slow, graceful waltzes with their dashing dates,

eating sumptuous cuisine, acting like beautiful little princesses, even for just one fleeting night of the year.

Anna turned up her nose at that. Her idea of a weekend well-spent is locking herself up in her room and listening to her vinyl records—and last weekend she'd already treated herself to a new album especially for the occasion. Besides, even if she went, that still wouldn't change the fact that she didn't have any friends to experience the festival with.

She pulled her hood over her head as a cold wind howled by. Make no mistake, Anna had never been bothered by being alone. Being with people had always easily exhausted her anyway, and with so many of them running around during the festival, students and teachers and parents and investors alike, she knew she wouldn't be able to take it. Having already spent her savings on a new vinyl meant her money at hand wouldn't allow her to try out any of the booths during open house.

And as for the gala? Forget it. There are more sensible things to spend money on than a fancy gown. Who'd want to see her in a flashy dress, anyway? She had no interest in this affair. She had no need for this nonsense.

But, then, why did she feel her heart tightening at the thought?

This was going to be her last gala. Next year, she'd be graduating, and looking back on her two past years spent here, there's really not a single thing that she could call a particularly fond memory. Her time here had been nothing but a tiresome cycle of getting by day-to-day, hanging onto average grades, spending time on halfhearted hobbies, avoiding people and opportunities. She didn't make any friends, and no one ever talked to her unless they really, really had to.

Or did they? At once, a few memories from her past years here suddenly bubbled up to the surface.

“Hey, Annaliese! Nice to meet you!” she remembered a tall, smiling blonde girl saying to her once, sticking out her hand for a handshake, “Would you like me to show you around the school? The tour they give is boring!”

Annaliese stared at the girl’s wide smile. It was so bright, so full of life, so full of hope, she recalled.

A better girl would’ve jumped at the opportunity to make her first friend in her new school like this.

A better girl wouldn’t’ve run away like a scared deer up the dorm stairways. A better girl wouldn’t’ve fled back to her room, locking herself up and retreating to her own solitary world.

A better girl would’ve said “yes.”

She never really got any better than that in the two whole years that followed.

“Anna! Go to the gala with us!” said Ela, looking blindingly elegant in her silk gown, one snowy evening in front of her door. “It’ll be fun!”

No.

“You look like there’s a lot of things on your mind,” the rector told her in his gentle voice, once when he found her in a garden. “Would you like to talk about it?”

No.

“Annaliese, wanna come with us to—”

“Annaliese, are you gonna go to—”

“Annaliese—!”

“Annaliese—!”

“Annaliese—!”

“Annaliese—!” “Annaliese—!” “Annaliese—!” “Annaliese—!” “Annaliese—!” “Annaliese—!”

No.

For two years here, she had done nothing but say “no” to things. No to this, no to that. “I don’t need friends,” “I don’t need to go to the gala”. She’d always contented herself sitting in her own little isolated corner of the world, letting the rest go by as she spectates, never reaching out, never letting people reach out to her. She was fine with it for the most part. After all, it never took long for any of them to move on

How different would her life here have been, if she were only a little bit stronger, a little less shy? Would she also have made beautiful memories of this place; would she have shared big, carefree smiles with her friends; would she have been a little less aimless, a little less lost?

An unwelcome thought crept into her mind. Maybe she was not skipping out on the gala just because she didn’t like people. Maybe she’s just too much of a coward to say “yes” for a change.

One of the girls walking on the school grounds—someone from her class named Therese or something like that—carrying leaflets caught her eye and waved her over, looking somewhat hopeful. Annaliese didn’t budge from her seat, but tried for a small smile. The girl who noticed her hesitated, then said something to the group and walked towards her.

“Hey, Anna, are you busy right now? We’re handing out flyers for our booths. Wanna help?”

She clutched her sleeves protectively. In her head, she could almost hear a better version of herself screaming: "Say yes. Please, Anna, please say yes."

At least once in your pathetic, miserable life, say yes.

She wanted to change. She felt so, so tired of these seemingly insurmountable walls around her, constricted by her self-made prison, sick of hearing the self-deceptive songs she tunes out the rest of the world with over and over and over again. There’s still a long time ahead of her. If only she could stop fleeing from the possibilities that lay ahead of her—if only she could say “yes,” even once—then maybe she could begin changing for the better.

... But she shook her head.

Therese looked disappointed. Is that pity on her face?

Anna averted her eyes and put her headphones back on, watching the girl shrink into the distance, looking vaguely defeated as she rejoined her friends who quickly resumed with whatever they were doing before.

Annaliese couldn’t help but smile bitterly to herself. Cowardice is an inescapable vice.

GLASS HOUSE

Katja Böhm

"Good job, everyone."

Katja took a deep breath, let it come slowly back out as a low whistle, and reveled in the warm sensation of her muscles relaxing. As if on cue, a concert of measured sighs, hisses and moans rose from the girls to her sides.

She opened her eye and turned to look directly at them. By her measure, they've been practicing since 15:34 – Sophia arrived late and she'd have loathed to just skip her part – and the signs were beginning to show. The light outside has already turned from orange to purple to little, and Gretchen, Theresa and Henrietta didn't look like they could take much more. Even Alexandra, whom Katja suspected would've had a fair bit more steam left in her if this'd been one of her ball games, was squatting on the stage step with her chest heaving, struggling to get her breaths in order.

"An undoubtable improvement on last time, but we aren't there just yet."

Her voice carried, even and clear, all the way to the side of the back row. That alone made her cheer up a little.

That the answer was a half barely intelligible grumbling where they must've thought she wasn't seeing them and a general, disheveled slump – that she could've done without.

She could've said something about it. With a few, who were being particularly melodramatic over the whole "evening practice session" issue on what Katja'd frankly assumed was principle – it might've even done some good. Arielle reacted well to that kind of public chiding, so long as you weren't too harsh, and given that she obviously wasn't going to give up her solo without a fight, someone had to tell her to keep her contralto more steady.

For the most part, though, it would've probably just soured their spirits. There was no point in punishing all of them. If nothing else, that wouldn't be conducive to training.

Her mind raced over the notes. They still weren't quite on schedule – no turning that wheel back – and Mrs. Weissman insisted she dedicate at least fifteen minutes near the end to breathing exercises. Add the time it'd take to clean up after them, give everyone their talk-to's, and the twenty minutes she's habitually allocated for unplanned trouble... Not nearly enough.

On the other hand, it wouldn't do to give anyone a sore throat. Then again, they could probably stand another try on the opening song.

"Don't worry. We've still got plenty of time to work until the gala. I'm sure we'll sound lovely by then."

A cursory scan of their faces. Smiles lighting up. Relaxed laughter from Alexandra. Nell looking proud Katja looked her direction.

"For now, let's take a break, then try going over some notes. There are a few areas where I think we could try doing better. Would that be alright?"

Murmurs and nods. Apparent indifference from some – she'll talk to them in private, later. Sometimes, that's what it took to ensure her words registered nice and clearly.

"Wonderful. Remember: drink at least ten gulps. If your bottle is empty, tell me and I'll give you another. Don't be shy. We have plenty, and you should not try to sing with a dry throat. Once you're finished, come back here so we can talk. Gretchen, Henrietta, if you'd be so kind?"

The chatter intensified, then waned – a gentle, enveloping tide of sound that was at the same time unlike and oddly reflective of the singing that preceded it. Obviously, nobody composed it, and yet – if Katja put herself in the right state of mind, sometimes, she was almost certain that there was a rhythm to the prattle. Random bursts of words became sounds, their meaning overlaid atop them and presently uninteresting, and the sounds became a fragmented melody. Selectively, instinctively, listening in on and processing the key notes in order, a sequence coalesced in her mind. Not a terribly wonderful one, but it did keep her brain occupied.

Pareidolia: the perception of familiar patterns in random stimuli. An omnipresent psychological phenomenon. So much so, that its lack was considered an abnormality, rather than the other way around. Technically related to apophenia, but less commonly used to refer to a symptom of schizophrenia. Everyone sees faces in clouds. Not everyone thinks they can divine the next lottery numbers by counting the pigeons on the roof.

Katja pondered if she'd have been annoyed if somebody'd called it that. They wouldn't have been entirely mistaken. It would've probably hinged on her mood. At the moment, she didn't think so.

She took her time drinking the water. It was healthier that way, for once, and besides, the girls needed the pause. They'd arrived by when she was done, which ever-so-slightly pleased her, since it fit with the pace, and their talk took no longer than the six minutes she'd intended. It even left some for a rest.

"This is nuts. I feel like I just ran a marathon", said Gretchen glumly, letting her body slide down the pew she'd taken to sit on like a deboned fish.

"Stop whining," replied Henrietta, who was already half the way down. "I'm not even seeing you bleeding from your nipples."

"Ewww, what's wrong with you?"

"What? It happens to marathon runners. From the shirt chafing against the skin and stuff."

"It is a bit inappropriate," agreed Katja.

"Wait, wait, what if you're wearing a bra?"

"I don't know, I don't run –"

Gretchen snickered. "You don't wear a bra, either."

"Look who's talking!"

There was something between a mutual giggle and a weary groan. Katja just smiled to herself.

"It's all going to be worth it soon", she said, purposefully stretching both arms behind her back. "And I'm proud of you for bearing it with me. We're going to be the stars of that evening. I hope everyone'll love us."

"I hope we'll get over with this", sighed Henrietta.

Katja looked at her like she'd just burped. "Come on", she said, "don't be such a downer. It's going to be fun! Imagine how everyone'll see us. We get to wear those special dresses they let us, we get to be on stage. All that light shining down on us... isn't that exciting?"

"We've already done it before."

"You've had ice-cream before, too!"

"No thanks to you," added Gretchen.

"What? I'm not forbidding you from eating ice-cream". Katja crossed her arms in a pout. "All I said was not to have any before a performance. I don't make up rules at random. You'll freeze up your vocal cords. You'd sound like a dog choking."

"That's from experience?"

Katja didn't respond. It was from experience.

"For all that it matters," she eventually said, taking a look at her watch and a glance towards the others to catch any peeks at the door. "Once you're done with the show, I'll eat ice-cream with you. We could ask the others later, take the whole choir. We could make it a party."

"You mean –"

"After the show. The whole show. Not the first part. Just... don't make that mistake."

The three of them sat back in silence, relishing seconds of peace that stretched out and felt like minutes.

"I thought I'd get to eat ice-cream after having my tonsils removed", said Gretchen. "Turns out they don't do that anymore. You just get mashed potatoes."

Henrietta turned to look towards her. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"I dunno. Ice-cream and throats and all that. That's just the connotation I had."

Katja shrugged.

"It felt weird," she continued. "Like my throat was... bubbly? You know what I mean? Like bubbles."

"From the ice-cream?" asked Henrietta.

"No, there wasn't any ice-cream! I think it was from the anesthesia or something."

That seemed to pique Katja's interest. "Is that so? I remember it as being more like pressure. Like I had something heavy and warm pressing against my chest." A year ago, she might've pointed vaguely towards the side of her face for emphasis. Nobody even thought about it.

"Are you sure it wasn't just your b –"

Katja shot her a look that was just cheery enough to shut her. Sensitive subjects were one thing, but that would've simply been crude.

She reached for her bag and pulled out a small, white packet, waving it at the two others as she got off her seat. It was about time they do.

"Lozenges, anyone? Non-mentholated honey and lemon."

"Who'd have thought you could make lukewarm tea in a pill sound worse," said Henrietta, and took one anyway. "How come everything's in a pill?"

Katja allowed a chuckle. "Wonders of the 21st century. Honestly, I just like the flavor."

"Besides," said Gretchen, grabbing one for herself as she got up, "You're the last one to talk. You take what, again? Adderall? That's it? You know people take that to get better at computer games?"

"Shut up! The doctor told me I need it to study, and it really helps, it's not for –"

Gretchen's hands rose defensively, but the smile didn't leave her face. "I know, I know, sheesh. But, like, perspective, yeah? I mean -" then her voice deepened conspiratorially. "Been to Alex's room recently? Really one-upped herself since the year started. I'm talking pharmacy here".

"Seriously? Wow. Guess that explains a lot," Henrietta's giggle itself lowered to match the tone. "Knowing her, it can't all be for personal use."

"Because she sells it or because half is for imaginary friends? -"

"Now, ladies," Katja's voice cut the exchange abruptly. It didn't rise a decibel, nor did it lower. The tone change was subtle and natural. "That's just unbecoming."

The quiet only lasted a second. For less than the span of a breath, the background murmurs once again filled Katja's mind, seeping instantly into the vacuum.

Gretchen and Henrietta's faces shifted. It could've meant nothing - most people's faces shift constantly.

Attentively, Katja's eye followed. For having a blind side, she had a marvelous skill for reading reactions from all sides at once. She had to.

She had a blind side.

To the best of Katja's judgment, neither appeared too distressed. Their frustration had passed in a moment. In another, it'd be replaced by an equally short span of shame, then ideally a touch of guilt. Then, most likely, something will distract them. Neither cared all that much. The irony was not lost on her. Nevertheless, she smiled. That, too, was a part of her role as unofficial manager of the choir. There were very few rules, per se - much that it could've made things easier - but every group of people had its share of unspoken principles. "No making fun of the other girls' issues unless they clearly and obviously allowed it" was one of theirs.

St. Dymphna was a tiny glass house. The choir, as it happened, was smaller. One might've thought the logic would easily follow but if there was a demographic prone to throwing rocks around at random it was teenagers, and these didn't always excel at the reasonable choice.

Teenaged girls gossip, even the most ladylike. God knows that Katja does. Probably literally - she would've felt stupid and evil to assume otherwise, what with omniscience and all.

Some principles, however, have to be kept in mind. Some behaviors mustn't be tolerated. If not out of basic decency or respect for her fellow singers, then for Katja's own, selfish reasons.

"We have little enough time as it is", she said, only half focused on the pair but doing admirably sounding otherwise. "Let's not waste any starting fights."

She started back towards the stage.

That was but one of many. She had her share of others. They shouldn't have been any of these two girls' business.

Glass is horrifically fragile.

The other choirgirls followed her into their spots. She didn't even have to tell them to get in their places in line. Frankly, her guiding gestures were a habit.

It was 20:19, and by Katja's reckon, there was still time to go over notes.

She'd started back towards the stage. The rest stepped silently after her. One after the other, their fellow choirgirls followed suit, not even having to be told to stand in their spot. It was 20:19, and by Katja's reckon, there was still time to go over notes.

She looked them over one final time before taking her place in the line, with one measuring, careful eye. Noting the smiles and the looks of exhaustion, the sheets in a few, shaking hands and the postures she'd comment on later. If at all. If it seemed necessary.

Overall, it looked good enough.

"Alright," she said. "Let's begin."

ADMIN PRIVILEGES

Lena Forst

Lena's fingers skipped back and forth across the keyboard like she was performing a little line dance. Tap-tap-tap-backspace, tap-tap-tap-backspace she went for at least an hour before she got the formatting of the article just right. Nobody really knows how to use word-processing software, they just know how to trick it into doing what they want.

Finally satisfied that details nobody would ever notice were all lined up, she hit the save button.

“Error: Admin privileges are required to perform this action. Contact your system administrator.”

Lena groaned. “Hertha! It’s doing it again!”

Ms. Wieck, the club advisor yelled out from her desk at the back of the room. “Are you using my account to log in?”

“Yeah! It still says that thing about privileges.”

“Well, maybe you two should check your privilege,” a third voice suggested. At the door, Fran was sporting her signature shit-eating grin, strutting inside the room with a big, proud gait with her hands on her hips. Her hair was a bit messed-up and she faintly stank of cigarette smoke and motorcycle grease, and had a fresh Band-Aid plastered on her nose. Lena nearly considered asking her what had happened to her, but quickly decided she more or less didn’t actually give a shit.

“Um, thank you, Fran. I’ll have IT check my account later,” said Ms. Wieck. She then got up from her desk, knowing full well that whether or not she can fix the problem is entirely up to the whims of the computer gods. She clicked her way through some well-rehearsed solutions and miraculously saved Lena’s article.

“Sorry kids,” she addressed the handful of club members. “It looks like our network is acting up again. Save your work locally until we get this fixed.”

No response came from the room. Aside from Lena, nobody was actually doing work on the terminals.

"I'm going to go check on my office," Ms. Wieck said to dismiss herself, which was code for "time for a smoke."

Much to Lena's disgust, Fran took that as her cue to pester her clubmates a little more.

"So I was thinking of putting a short story of mine in the next issue."

"We don't do that anymore," Lena replied.

"Something festive we could publish ahead of the gala. I shall call it 'CinderLena.' It's about a disheveled peasant girl who gets invited to the swankiest ball in the kingdom. She ends up having to bail out by midnight, but in the end it's okay because the smitten prince finds her through the glass muzzle she leaves behind."

"It might surprise you, darling, but it's inspired by a true story from German folklore. I'm a little sketchy on the details, though," Fran continued. "Does that thing of yours have a ball-gag? I'm not sure if I see one."

Lena's critique of Fran's story was short and to the point. "Eat a dick."

"Obviously not. I take it you don't approve of my little yarn for gala season?"

"If you want to do something for the gala, how about you just do a straight up regular-ass article on the event?"

"Homework, at a party? I believe you have me mistaken for some other uptight square."

Lena didn't expect Fran to jump at the chance to report on the gala. It was probably for the best. Whatever Fran would write would certainly be gutted by Ms. Wieck and rewritten entirely.

“Oh deary me, Lena. Are you going to be reporting on the gala all by yourself again? Just let Hertha do it.”

“No. It has to be done, and it has to be done right. We can’t fuck up another issue, especially if we’re going to print before the end of the year.”

“So the school newspaper may die. Let it die. Print is dead. Just run a little feature on the club’s blog and be done with it.”

“I don’t blog.”

“12 Baffling Traditions of St. D’s and Their Secret Nazi Origins. Number 4 will SHOCK you! I can have a rough draft by tomorrow.”

By this point, Fran’s prattling had dissolved into just another source of white noise. Lena calmly packed up her things and got up from the desk while Fran went on about how her grandmother was from Slovenia, and how Slovenia is apparently the Switzerland of the Balkans, and how somehow Lena should be interested in that information.

“Ey...” Fran spoke up, feeling interrupted. “I’m serious. If you don’t want *me* as your date, relax. We can all go as a group. My friends and your... say, do you have friends even? No matter, I’ve got a posse to spare. You’ll feel right at home.”

Somehow, Ms. Wieck managed to sneak back into the room, probably after being chased out of her usual smoking spot by other staffers.

“That’s a wonderful idea, Lena! If we make it a group project, there will be less work to go around, and--”

"Oh, shoot," Fran declared while checking both wrists for a watch that wasn't there, "I'll be at my therapist."

"During the gala? I'm pretty sure Dr. Haas will be there to chaperone. But if he's not, I can ask him to reschedule--"

"I mean before. I have an appointment before. That afternoon. It's usually super intense and I need the rest of the day to cool off."

"Oh," Ms. Wieck relented. "Take care of yourself then."

"I will. Byeeeeeee!"

Fran scuttled out before anyone could bring forth more questions to sink her alibi, while Ms. Wieck stood grateful that she won't have to break up another fight that day.

"So, Lena," she asked in her most casual sisterly voice, "What are your plans for the Gala?"

"Uh, basically I'll show up like an hour before, interview the people setting up, and then take pictures most of the night."

"Which I'm sure anyone could do if I assigned it to them."

"I doubt it," Lena replied. Ms. Wieck's authority only holds sway over the most timid and feeble of pupils.

"Fine. I'm making it an assignment. Go with a date. Just ask someone. You might be pleasantly surprised."

"You're too old."

Ms. Wieck's face crumpled.

"How about Marco?" she suggested, thinking on her roster of club kids. "I'm pretty sure he's free."

"You know he has a chronic masturbation problem."

“He does not! Who said he did?”

“I saw it in a newsletter.”

“No you didn’t. And I think you should stop paying attention to rumour-mongers.”

Lena cocked her head. “How do you know he doesn’t have a chronic masturbation problem?”

“I just know for a fact.”

“Did you get that off his file?” Lena asked. “Sharing that info with me is very unprofessional.”

“Okay, fine, fine. Forget I said anything. Do what you want during the dance. Just try not to do something, or nothing, that you would regret.”

UNCERTAIN TOMORROW

Erik Wilhelm

Erik didn’t know exactly how long he’d been asleep. When his eyes opened, a thick, cozy blanket had already been draped over him, and the sports and mountain climbing magazines he’d spent the entire car ride distracting himself with have been piled up in a neat stack beside him, atop which lay a red box plastered with a large icon of what he recognized to be a fast food restaurant chain. Her mom had taken over the driver’s seat now, chatting with his father about something. Judging by what his barely half-conscious mind could gather, it’s something about a reality TV series she had recently gotten hooked on.

Looking outside, the scenery had also changed. He recalled they were still somewhere in Germany around the time he dozed off and it was swelteringly, hellishly hot and miserable, but now, wherever they were supposed to be, the sun had already begun to set, nothing presently but a dim red disk hiding behind a small fleet of clouds and the thick jungle of skyscraper silhouettes racing past them.

Erik reached for the box on top of the pile of magazines and opened it. It's a burger, still warm and probably had been bought not too long earlier. It's nothing spectacular, really, but it looked *okay* and smelled *okay*, and for the moment that was enough to make his stomach rumble.

Noticing him stirring back to life, his mother glanced at him. "Oh, you've come to. You've been asleep all this afternoon."

"I... well... I guess I was. Are we there yet?"

"Almost," his father said, looking at his watch, "just an hour or so and we're there. Rest up as much as you need; it's going to be a busy few days for you before school starts."

Erik nodded, but no words came to his aid. The mere fleeting mention of "school" was enough to sober him up. His face warped into a slight grimace, almost as if the burger in front of him had just instantaneously turned rancid.

Privatgymnasium St. Dymphna. It's as normal and inoffensive a name for a school as it gets. From the websites and forums he'd surfed researching the school, he'd heard nothing but overwhelming praise. The institution, he read, already has a long, colorful history ever since its foundation more than a century ago, and is well-known around Vienna and Austria in general, having already produced a great roster of luminary alumni now at the forefront of their respective trades, many of whom Erik even recognized. It's a feat not just any school would be

capable of bragging about, but the fact is made possibly even more amazing, Erik thought, when you take into account the fact that it's a school for... a school for...

Erik sighed. *Stop right there*, he thought. *You haven't even seen the place with your own eyes yet.* He repeated this mantra in his head over and over in an attempt to make it stick. It's what he'd been telling himself for days and weeks and months now. *It could actually be beautiful and happy and beneficial. It could actually even be the best place you've ever been to in your life!*

...Yeah, right.

Erik wished he still had the naiveté to believe such comforting self-deceptions. The past few months would've been much easier to swallow that way. No matter what he saw or heard about the place, they did nothing to assuage his ever-growing anxieties. It's beautiful, yes, and it's most definitely highly regarded, but when you tear down that shiny veneer of glamour and fame, the fact will still remain that it's nothing but a gilded trash bin for polite society's rejects. And now, he's nothing but yet another one of those.

"I know you're worried about the school, Erik," his mother said, "and I understand why, but don't overthink it. It's not as bad as you think. Some of our friends in Austria and Germany were graduates from there, and they're all quite successful now."

"Is... is that so..." he whispered, sinking back into his seat, and nodded. A part of him wanted to believe his mother's words. "I guess you have a point. But I still feel a bit fidgety. There're just so many ways it could turn out. Some—a lot of them bad, naturally."

His mother nodded, and gave him her usual reassuring motherly smile. "All the more reason to go find out, right?"

He had no answer to that. He stared at the car's roof, trying to imagine himself at his new school. What kind of people would he even meet in a place like that? What will happen to him there? What kind of chaotic world is thriving behind those massive gates, hidden away from the eyes of the rest of the world? Even his wildest fancy couldn't give him a clear enough picture. It was futile to even think.

Finally starting on his burger, he watched the sun disappear into the bleeding horizon. When the weekend ends, by entering the gates of that school, Erik would have no choice but to accept two truths that he'd been running away from months now since that fateful day in the mountains: that he's no longer part of the normal world, and that he no longer lived a normal life.

It's a bitter pill to swallow, but he has to.
