

I feel their warnings. Everywhere. It consumes free thought, eats it whole with steel jaws and glass teeth. The alarm, sulking in the shadows until called for duty. It's no different than a prison, really. Perhaps more upfront about intentions, but even guards have been known to pull triggers at mouse squeaks.

I'm not sure Mom and Dad know anymore. They seem to have gotten used it. Become absorbed by it. The Routine lives in their brain, fused alongside memories older than I. Coded in, accepted. A parasite in disguise. I imagine, I wonder, I hope that one day they'll let me enter. Slip between cranial bones just as it did. Tear the structure open, pry and pick out the wrongness like a chimp would fleas.

I love them. But I'm not sure I'm allowed.

I'm only ten, you see. My mind does not comply with the heavy gray boxes the others have been tucked into. Others, being the rest. The adults. The ones who have forgotten that a mouth does not solely exist to inform Routine of tasks completed.

Routine. I hate it, but I am not allowed to hate. It tells me so, but it's to save an ass its own. The world would stain red and black if emotions so heavy, so commanding in their no-nonsense bellows, were allowed to seep into our white wonderland.

But they did not want to stained marble. Decades of forced de-evolution it took to create a world so lukewarm it was threatened by flare of one's nostril.

I step out the door and drift into the backseat of Dad's Buick. He does not smile nor acknowledge me. It's been years since we spoke. I try once a month, but he has fallen too deep for rescue. The bowels of this prison echo your thoughts, grow them large like lurking monsters, but seal away trickles of reason.

He does not drive, but the car too is carried. Pre-programmed. They still order me to the backseat, despite my weighing a proud seventy-five pounds. At sixteen, the father moves one seat right and the child takes over the driver's. He sits just the same as he would further back, but such customs provide a veil of tradition over a society too shiny and plain. It is only ever the boy, too. Sheila would never be granted the honor of settling her rear in the throne of fine plastic-leather-wool. I have lost the feeling of the words in my mouth. They belonged there, once. Not settled, but hanging on strings for access as easy as wind. Now, the strings disintegrated, letting the syllables once carrying meaning fall into a gaping, infinite abyss. Use it or lose it, they may once have said. But now they don't say anything.

I find my place in line. It's all a line. Everywhere you go. This line is no different, 'cept for the lack of height. Any too short or towering too tall is taken away. Where? I don't know, I couldn't say.

I keep Sheila to myself because she stands as large as a two-story child. Her arms wave where there would have been wind years back. Hair ripples in waves of an ocean I have never seen, but I swim and dive and sink in the world beneath her strands. She is everything Routine is not. Routine screams, cries, sternly disapproves, yet forbids us to do the same.

Sheila follows behind me but her footfalls make no sound. Her string body does not pair with a shadow, dancing a subtle jig on the tarmac as if in secret from the rest of the world. It does not grow like mine. I weigh and I measure and I hope for no change. Just the right amount of change. Everything perfect. Just perfect enough to satisfy the robotic drone of tongue that fills our walls and our minds. Routine.

"You are ruining the flow," it chimes. I am torn from my momentary trance. Just a moment too long and now it knows. They know. The countdown begins. "—Four. Three. Two."

I jump out of my feet, forward to the parallels of students. I can feel eyes, all colors beneath their mandated black contacts, shift towards me. Though heads do not dare turn. I was close, but they would be done. Zip. Zilch. Disparu. Cease to exist and never to return.

It is lunch somehow. I do not remember my classes, for I've had too many to count. They do not distinguish from one another, but that is the point. Right? I have learned to listen with my brain off, fall into slumber with open eyes while my mind roars in secret.

There is no exit, but here I am. I escape without escaping. I am free in the inch they could not reach. I am a bird in a cage all my own.

I open my lunchbox. Grey, of course. The color of frowns and eyes stolen of light. But inside it is not grey. My heart is a super nova. Gone immediately with an explosion too small to have stolen me away from this horror. Even Sheila lets a scream escape from a mouth that had never spoken with more than gusts of wind.

Inside is a yellow.

A banana. Plain and bright. Now the heads turn. Perhaps on instinct too engrained to be muted by mechanical orders and fear of the dark. Curiosity once killed cats, but it since grew. And grew and grew. Swelled to a pulsating tumor, tearing through their white marble and grey faces like a slow earthquake. A gradual terror.

I could not remember placing the yellow. Maybe in dreams. Maybe Sheila. I love the yellow. Immediately, all at once.

The alarms began and my arms were taken from me. A sea of fifty- to fifty-five-inch tall bodies turned to me. My grand finale. I do not scream. I could not, my lungs had shriveled to two hanging raisins. I was dragged into a black. Endless and unforgiving. But I could scream. I could cry and hate and look wherever I pleased.

And no matter where my gaze fell, there was no white marble.