

Money-Hungry Hunt

By Alexia Pacheco

My grandfather and I sat on the carpet designed with different swirls and neutral colors of brown and beige that lay beside the wooden table. It was made of maple that brought the otherwise boring living room life. On the table, there was a chess board and a plate of warm and chewy chocolate chip cookies and two cups filled with cold, 2% milk.

“Jada, look carefully at the board.” My grandfather warned, his eyebrows raised high, as he sipped on his glass, “Look carefully now. I mean it.”

My grandfather’s words repeated in my head. I grabbed a cookie and nibbled like I was a bunny eating grass. In a slow manner, I scanned the checkerboard of black and white wooden chess pieces. I looked at my grandfather whose caramel-colored skin shines.

What does he mean “look carefully?” I don’t see any winning move that could earn a checkmate. There might be multiple moves I could do to win and trap his King, but I don’t see a checkmate that’s as clear as day.

“I don’t see any winning move.” I said, as I played with a coil of my hair out of nervousness.

“Jada, to win, you need to make moves.” He explained, ice-blue eyes shooting through my soul like daggers, scratching at his bald head, “I didn’t say you’d be winning the game yet.”

“That’s what I thought...”

I looked at the board and moved one of the pieces.

My grandfather took his turn, grabbed his black King with his large hands and moved it one block to the left. Suddenly, I saw the winning move. His King happened to be in the perfect position, trapped by my rook and Queen. It was as if my brain started functioning at the speed of light.

I secured the win by moving my queen down one square, “Checkmate.”

My grandfather stood silently, squinting his old eyes at the board. He chuckled, “Seems you’ve won!”

“Yay, I won!” I exclaimed, as I jumped up and down as if I was on top of a trampoline. I started to squeal and whipped my arms around my head as I ran around the room.

“Damn. I really shouldn’t have let you have any more caffeine.”

“I wasn’t running on caffeine! It was cold, hot chocolate!”

“No it wasn’t!”

I never found out whether or not he gave me caffeine, but he and I laughed so much that day that while I sipped on cold, hot chocolate. I spit it out all over the board, pieces, and table. It was hilarious. My grandfather had to use lots of Lysol and a dirty, old, white rag to wipe the mess. Looking back at it, I wonder what happened to that old chess board. He gave it to me as a gift afterwards, but personalized it only for me. It has to be around here somewhere.

I walk around my small room cluttered with textbooks, crinkled research papers, romance novels, and mini-clay figurines of chess pieces as people that lay on my wooden desk I recently painted a fresh coat of white. Along with my old wooden shelf that holds all my journals that range in neutral colors of beige, black, gray, and white.

If you couldn’t tell, I’m a regular plain Jane. Yet, I’m also poor, so it’d be nice to have some more money and move above ground where I feel I truly belong. At least, I think. Ever since the nuclear war, nothing’s been the same. Down here in the underground everyone’s in poverty, fighting for simple necessities, trying to escape, and whatnot. Crime rates are rising too. Though, in the 27 years I’ve spent in the underground...it’s been alright despite the lack of tasty food or legal shopping ‘cause all we have are mainly black markets. I mean, I always thought black markets were for buying organs and whatnot. Gross. Plus, I had my grandfather who nurtured me, educated me, and humbled me. Though, I may tend to act like a brat when I spiral out of

mental control. In the corner of the room, beside the windows, my dark green duvet covers my run-down mattress that sits on a palette board. I must admit, it's aesthetically pleasing to the eye.

I look around my room as my eyes fall onto the cardboard box sitting on my shelf which is full of my grandfather's belongings that he kept himself. I never bothered to check what was inside after his death, because how could I? Plus, I wouldn't want to be someone who invades someone else's personal and private belongings.

I walk towards the shelf that sits in the corner of the room opposite to my bed. The floorboards creak with each light step I take in my dirty bottomed, pastel, purple socks.

On my tiptoes, my arms reach out to grab the sides of the box. I pull the box close to my chest, and drop it onto my bed. Dust flies through the air. Inhaling, I sneeze.

"Geez. So much dust." I mumble, swatting it away with my hands.

The objects in the box clutter around, and a thin, white envelope peeks out from behind an old, framed photograph of my grandfather and I huddled together in front of his school with melting ice cream cones in our hands.. I reach for the envelope and pull it out slowly.

"To Mr. Foster..." I read aloud, picking up the flap of the envelope.

I pull out the sheet of paper carefully and start reading what's written in sprawled letters. Each sentence I read is like a blow to the mind. Shocking. Unbelievable. Crazy. And confusing.

"He's been rich this entire time!?" I exclaim, staring back and forth between the paper and the wall, "I can't believe this!"

I hop off my bed, pacing back and forth in a speedy manner, thinking, calculating how any of this could be possible. He's been rich and wealthy and didn't think to tell me he had this money before he passed? How come? Does this money still exist? Where is it?

I walk back to my bed and pick up the envelope and letter. I widen the envelope to check if there's anything else inside. There's multiple small, rectangle shapes of brown paper with cut out and pasted magazine letters on the surface.

"I figured you'd like to play a game." I read aloud, breathing deeply, "Solve this puzzle and you'll find my hidden money."

Geez. What on Earth would make you think I'd want to play a game to find money, grandfather!? If you've had a gracious amount of money in this economy, why didn't you give it to me beforehand?!

I look at the second card that reads "Clue #1" on the surface.

Trying to use methods to calm my nerves isn't quite working. I feel like I'm walking on a highwire. This feels thrilling and risky and unbelievable.

"Look in a place where we were everyday, then search high and low for something that sounds out of place." I read aloud, putting the rest of the clues and letter back into the envelope with care.

Okay, so, what place would we both be in? It's obviously not home, because that's a ridiculous place to hide hidden money, especially if he planned a scavenger hunt. So...next would be...the school! It's named after him, he worked there, and I work there now! It has to be the school!

Immediately, I change out of constellation themed pajamas and into something adventurous. A black trenchcoat over my black blouse and worn out baggy jeans. I tie my voluminous curly hair back into a slick ponytail and snatch my black backpack off the floor. In case the money needs to be put somewhere along with the clues and some snacks like chocolate chip cookies or peanut butter crackers which are my favorite.

I rush to the front door of my house, lock it from behind, and hop onto my rickety old bicycle that needs major repairs, oil and tires filled with air. If possible, I'd love to get a new paint job for it too. In the color green, maybe, but I don't have time for that and that's unnecessary money being spent. If I was paid more as an educator, then, maybe I'd have enough extra money to spend on myself, but I have to pay rent and bills and buy food 'cause a girls gotta survive down here.

I pedal to the school that's eerily waiting for me to enter. The rickety, faded yellow bulb hanging above the brightly painted yellow door with cracks and chips of paint in the edges. Why does it feel like the universe does this on purpose? The

outside of the school is colorful and full of students' names as my grandfather and I have always encouraged creativity, especially here in the underground.

I walk inside the small school, cramped with run-down wooden tables and plastic yellow chairs with tennis balls on the bottoms of each leg. There's also bright, circular, white lights built into our ceiling that kind of remind you of a hospital too. In the back corner, bookshelves gather dust and are filled with old textbooks provided by the government from many years back. We do have picture books, chapter books, comics, and classics too. There's even two fluffy blue and red beanbags and a race track carpet to cover the floor. Along the walls there's artworks strung up by wooden clips. Most depict nature or the children's imagination of what the world above the underground may look like which as a teacher is pretty fascinating to see.

Anywho, back to the main point of biking here. I look around the classroom, thinking of possible places that fit the clues description. Where can you search high and low? It has to be some place I don't check often. I turn my head to peek at the artworks strung up. I'd say those are high up, but not low. If it's high and low, it must touch the ground and ceiling or close to one another at least.

I walk over to the bookshelf coated in dust, wiping it away with the cuff of my shirt. Then, I inspect each book one by one to see if any look out of place or feel different to the touch like a hardcover book, but more sturdy? I knock on each book with my knuckles and listen to the sound, when a copy of *To Kill A Mockingbird by Harper Lee* creates a hollow sound. I pull the book off the shelf and I notice how the pages aren't real and it's like those books where you hide objects inside. I open it and inside is an ornate bronze key with the top of the key creating a rim around an old coin.

"This is certainly interesting..." I mutter to myself, unzipping my backpack and placing the key inside, "Time to check Clue #2."

I grab the envelope and pull out the second piece of brown paper.

"I knew you'd find the key Jada. Surely, you know its purpose." I read aloud quickly, "The past is vast and tricky. You're once young, but now old. The key opens something valuable to the past. Once you find that object, the treasure will be found at last."

I think I'm going to go insane. My grandfather, Triton Felix Foster, a polymath and lover of puzzles! Of course he'd pull a funny old trick like this before he passed! Of course he would! What on Earth is valuable and from the past? There's so many things. It could be anything! Is it sentimental? Is it something I could find in an antique shop? What could it be?

I laugh to myself, thinking how ridiculous this scavenger hunt is and why I'm even doing it. Why did I even choose to do it in the first place? Was I that hungry for some cash? Is this how bad living in the underground makes me feel? Poor and helpless? Why couldn't I have stayed above ground when my parents had me? There's no possible way they were financially unstable. It'd make no sense.

I pull at a coil of my brown, curly hair, stretching it out and letting it scrunch back up. This has been one of my coping methods or things I do when I'm thinking deeply about something ever since I was little.

I breathe in, "Okay, Jada, if we're really thinking through this Clue...he would've chosen something in plain sight. Something sentimental."

I reread the clue, "You're once young, but now old."

I assume it must've been something from when I was a child, considering it's addressed to me and it says once young. I attempt to recall past memories where any objects may have been of significance. Suddenly, it hits me like a lightbulb.

I rush out of the school, hop on my bike and pedal back to my house. I park my bike near the front door, unlock the door with my house keys, twist the knob, kick off my shoes, and run to my room as if my life depended on it. Right now, I can't tell if getting closer to the money is exciting or whether it's the scavenger hunt itself? I rush over to my closet and throw unfolded piles of clothes behind me until I reach far enough back to the thick wooden chessboard kept in somewhat pristine condition. Gliding my hands over the surface, I feel around for a keyhole. My finger slips into a tiny hole and I rush to take the key out of my backpack and stick it inside.

I hear a click as the wooden chessboard opens only reveals nothing, but a slip of paper.

“What..?” I cry, disappointed, “This isn’t right. T-there should be a load of money!”

Frantically, I snatch the paper with my sweaty palms.

“Ice Cream.” It says, written with the same magazine cutouts of letters.

Sighing in frustration, I rest my head back and stare up at the ceiling, then down again. Ice Cream? Are you serious? That’s the only clue you’re giving me? I thought there’d be money. There’s so much space to fit wads of cash inside. Yet, there’s no money. No stacks of fresh, smelling, printed green paper. Let’s face it. He had no money. This was probably all a hoax to get my hopes up. I was so excited to sneak above ground too and leave this hellhole.

I sigh, carefully putting the chessboard onto the floor and I walk over to my bed to lay down, but it’s got the box on it still. I pick up the box, and stare at my grandfather’s objects inside.

Suddenly, I see it. The ice cream. The photograph of my grandfather and I eating ice cream! I place the box on the floor, and grab the frame in my hands, opening it up from behind.

That’s when I see the slip of green paper, multiple.

“Holy guacamole!!!” I shout, excitedly, jumping up and down on the squeaky floorboards of my room.

I spin around, arms swinging freely, and laugh.

I take each slip of money out, counting based on its value and stick them inside a new envelope for safe-keeping. There’s over 50, \$100 bills in here! Where could he have gotten all this money? Why did he save it?

I stare back at the frame, noticing in big, black letters, a message.

I read slowly, tears swelling in my eyes, “Jada, I hope you’re not mad I sent you on this scavenger hunt, but I do hope your wishes come true. Love, grandpa.”