

“Don’t believe anything they tell you.”

One final gasp.

And then she was gone. Her hand still in my hand, growing colder by the millisecond. The locket she pressed against the skin of my palm began to feel warm comparatively. Her shirt somehow looked more orange next to her white skin.

A hand extended from a blue sleeved jacket grabbed my shoulder. I slipped the locket in my pocket. The hand ushered me out. It was just as cold as hers- as cold as death.

It had gotten her too. It usually starts in the knuckle of your ring finger on your left hand. It starts to get unnaturally warm- or at least that’s what people say. And then it spreads through your whole body. And you sweat. You basically become your own sun. Then, when the sun gets too hot, it shuts down and turns ice cold. And it got her. So I guess now I have no mother. I have a locket instead.

She knew before she got it. She told me she was next. She wouldn’t tell me how she knew, but she warned me that soon I’d be alone.

She told me that I was different and, because of that, I would be truly alone. She said I would have to believe what I know is true because there would be no one to believe me.

I still do not know what this means.

I left the doors of the Facility. They call it the Facility because no one wants to call it what it actually is. It is where the orange shirts go when they get sick. I’ve never known anyone to be admitted to the Facility and then later return to routine. Once it gets you, then you go to the Facility. That’s the first time I had ever been inside. There were several beds, all lined up. One of them was mother’s. I knew it was mother because she was my mother, but when the blue jacket

leads you into the room, just for a moment, it looked as if one bed is sitting between mirrors. Every person looked just alike. The face on the man with the blue jacket was painted on. We walked into the room of mirrors, which really had no mirrors, and he just watched. He watched the orange shifts stagger about the room looking for which bed housed their loved one. He watched the bodies on the bed slip out of this world and he watched them as if they were never really there. I wondered if there was a blue jacket anywhere that would've done something different. I suppose not. Never in our Facility anyway. I cannot imagine any man wearing a blue jacket weeping for the lose of an orange shirt. It seems the face comes with the jacket.

I walked to the bench across the street and watched the red eyes emerge from the building for the next few hours- one tear stained orange shift after another. It almost felt as though they were crying for me, so I didn't have to. Of course, they weren't. They were crying for themselves and their own loses. But my eyes seemed to be frozen in time. I could almost still feel her hand in mine. I know I should be crying. But yet, they shall have to bear the task on my behalf as well.

My hand slowly started to feel warmer.

I've learned to assess before panicking.

Do I feel a sweat?

No.

Is the heat burning?

No.

Did the pain start in knuckle of my ring finger on my left hand?

No.

I decided I must be safe. The warmth was merely the lack of chill- the lingering feeling of her cold hand vanishing from my grasp.

A wave of orange passed on my right as the people headed to the Dining Building, choroled by the men in blue jackets. The chime must've struck for 5pm. I did not hear it. I have never missed the chime before. My heart became very loud in my ear, increasing in tempo by the millisecond. If one of the blue jackets turns and sees me I fear I will face an infraction. I curled my shoulders down and I stayed behind the tree, hiding my orange in the green leaves. I watched the crowd of orange dotted with blue walk ahead. After the orange had passed, I stood, intending to join the line a few paces behind, hoping my tardiness would go undetected.

I wondered what this scene might look like if I were not me. I mean, if I could view objectively. To see me, one small orange dot, separate from the united orange dots just head. Or, if this outside observer I've imagined would even notice me behind the crowd. If perhaps the spectacle of the large dots would deter the outside eye from seeing me here at all. I stopped walking. In the middle of the sidewalk.

I could never stop on the sidewalk before. I have never been separate from the crowd. If you stop in the crowd, you'd stop the whole crowd. Then, I imagine you'd get reprimanded for breaking peace by the blue jackets. At least that's what I imagine would happen. I suppose no one in the crowd has ever stopped.

I watched until the last blue shirt went into the Dining Building. I did not follow. Perhaps in an act of defiance, or perhaps merely because I was not hungry, I pivoted my back to the dining hall and walked away.

My mother once told me, if someone were ever to walk away from the crowd, it would be me. She didn't even say if she hoped it would be me or if she feared it would be me. She just said it would be. I was four then. I didn't remember until after I had fulfilled her prophecy that she had predicted it. I don't suppose my mother was a witch or a psychic- like they tell you in stories- she was far too plain, too much like me. But because I knew she had been right before, I accepted my self-gather evidence and supposed she would be right again. I let the words of her latest and last conviction build a mirage in my head. *Don't believe anything they tell you.*

I replayed the scene in my head. Her words skidding across her lips. Her burning hand going cold. Her locket touching my-

The locket. My stomach twisted like a wet rag being wrung out. Had I lost it? She had left me one thing and I'd lost it. I breathed steadily as to not reveal my panic, as if I was being monitored. I pressed my hands into my pockets- perhaps a bit too quickly, and a bit too sharply. The locket brushed my finger and my lungs collapsed from the release of air. I hadn't even noticed I was holding my breathe. I kept my hand in a fist around the locket until I reached my dwelling. Now it was truly *my* dwelling, because I did not share it with mother.

I took my left hand out of my pocket and fumbled with the door. It took longer to get inside because I do not usually use my left hand to unlock the door. I always use my right hand. But my right hand was holding the locket, so I could not use my right hand. I heard a click and pressed the door open- again a bit too eager. I stepped inside and clicked the door shut.

I headed to the corner of the room where the toilet is. It is the only part of the dwelling that is not visible through the windows. I removed the locket from my pocket. I kept my fist latched around it, as if I was afraid it would fly away or be lost in some mean wind. I looked at

my closed fist for a few seconds. I don't think I was *afraid* to open my hand. Perhaps I could sense the locket held some sort of power. Perhaps I was still numb from losing my mother. Perhaps the pause was a product of the overall density of my being. Regardless, I brought my left hand in front of me to open my right hand, not trusting just one hand to complete the task alone.

I brought the locket close to my face. It seemed less delicate now, less like it was going to be taken. In fact, it seemed the opposite: the locket could never be taken. I was a part of me now.

It was gold and covered in scratches that made a picture. It drew an eye, made up of several lines and dots and curves.

I meticulously took each end of the chain and held the locket in front of me. My hands met in the middle to trade off ends of the chain and flip the locket around. Now the picture was facing me. It would be safe against my skin. It felt like a secret between me and mother. We were the only ones who know the locket isn't just a plain locket.

I felt a sense of power. The house didn't feel as still. I let this new found power carry me toward the window and I watched the orange shirts walk back to their dwellings. I anticipated dining hour would end soon. The men in the blue jackets came out first to line the sidewalks, ensuring we all made it into our dwellings by sundown. I wondered if they knew I was missing. I hoped they did not do a headcount tonight. I realized my hand was on the locket and I was suddenly very afraid the men in the blue jackets would try to take the locket or turn it over to see the secret I shared with my mother. I had never felt afraid of the men in the blue jackets before that moment. *Don't believe anything they tell you.*

I laid awake at night, my fist guarding the locket. I waited to hear a pounding at the door. Someone wondering why I missed dining hour this evening. Wondering about my locket. I

suppose the second was more paranoia. None-the-less, no one knocked. The sun bled into the room. I had made it through the night.

I was still wearing my orange shirt from yesterday. I went to change into a new orange shirt. The color orange had never looked so repulsive to me. I had never considered why the men in the blue jacket gave us orange to wear. I sat on my bed across from my shirt. I felt the locket against my bare skin. My fingers dance around its corners and edges and then, with a small click, it popped open. I hadn't considered opening it. The image on the front had eaten all my attention. I did not imagine there might be more.

I catch the latch and opened it fully, slowly. In it was a worn and folded piece of paper. Some lines had disappeared, but I could just barely make out the picture. My mother held a baby, I suppose must be me. A man stood beside her. They were both smiling and happy. I never knew my father. My mother told me about him once or twice. Always in hushed tones. She said they took him when they put us here. They put him in a different dwelling. I've never heard a word so sour as the word "they." Perhaps it was just the way my mother said it. Neither my mother nor my father wore orange or blue in the picture. They were in no uniform. They had a life before the men in the blue brought them here. My mind flooded with little hints my mother had given me that I had never managed to puzzle together. I hugged my knees to my bare chest. My knees were soon wet with the tears I had awaited many hours ago. The chimes went off to report to duty.

They would surely notice if I missed duty. I picked up my orange shirt from yesterday and used it to soak up the salt water. I crumpled the picture up and placed it back in the locket. I

clicked the locket shut. I held it there for a just a second longer, just to ensure it would stay shut. I pulled my shirt over my head and over my locket and headed out the door.

My hands shook just slightly. I suppose I can pass it off as hunger. Many of the orange shirts shake from hunger. We haven't much to share. I briefly considered that I was in fact shaking from hunger as I missed dining hour yesterday. I brushed the thought aside. I knew why my hands shook. I tried to regulate my breathe so they couldn't see me planning in my head. There had to be a plan.

Still counting my breathe and monitoring my face closely I stood in line behind the other girls to be accounted for. We stood in a line everyday before duty. We are checked off by a blue jacket at the front. I had been focusing so much on keeping my secret I hadn't noticed I was at the front of the line.

"What's your name, sweetie." I looked up to see the blue jacket smiling. I had seen him before. He smiled at me a lot, sometimes touching my arm or my neck if he could get away with it. I had never really paid it much mind. I had always merely assumed he would do me less harm if I stayed silent. I have always followed the rules. Perhaps this is why I never felt afraid of the blue jackets. I knew they were a punishing body, but I had never anticipating being punished. But now I had a picture of my mother not in orange. Now I know they put us here- here where we do not belong. I considered all this in the time it took me to look up at his menacing smile. I used the churn in my stomach to signal a smile right back at him. I even manage to flutter my eyelashes just a bit. This was my plan.

I felt strangely prepared to embark on such a mission, should the word even be appropriate. My mother's voice echoed in my head. She had been preparing me to break this...

this... *system*. My mind found the word and immediately rejected it, like a child eating bad porridge. A combinations of consonants and vowels can be so slimy all slung together. Small tidbits of advice rung in my head, the severity of the situation masked by her sweet voice.

*No one suspects anything of a girl who flutters her eyelashes.*

*In order to overstep a welcome, you must first be welcome.*

*Footsteps sound like thunder when you're trying not to be heard. Walk only on your big toe.*

*Remember who you are.*

I wanted to know why we were put here. Why we must obey the chimes. Why we must obey the blue jackets. Why only the orange shirts die the way my mother did. Why no one else seems to notice such oddities. No one was going to tell me. I had to find it for myself. And I wasn't going to find it here. I had to go with a blue jacket to... wherever it is the blue jackets go when they are not monitoring us. I knew not where or what this place could be- *their* place- I only knew my answers must be there.

I was very strategic throughout my day at work. I looked at the blue jacket only sporadically but always with a sense of willingness. I was careful not to look too much, so he did not fear he had lost control.

The chime rang for duty hours to end and I stood from my machine, discreetly looking around to see where he had gone. I stayed to the back of the group and made it just in front of the exit. As I resolved that my plan had failed, he stepped directly into my path. I jumped, startled but followed it with a smile to reassure him.

“Where are you off to?” I couldn’t tell if it was his voice that repulsed me or if it was his blue jacket.

With a slightly curved up smile, “I suppose wherever I am meant to be,” intentionally open ended. “Sir,” I followed.

“Well you’re accounted for in my book,” he slide his hand around my waist. I held my breathe to avoid a noticeable cringe. In *his* book. I just continued to smile. I was experimenting with the delicate balance of letting him feel in charge and knowing this was *my* plan.

“And where does your book say I should be, sir.” The words came out even smoother than in my head.

He did not respond. He steered me from my waist away from the door and guided out the back. I did not know there was another exit in this building. He lead me to a small transport car and gestured for me to sit in the front seat. Orange shirts are not meant to sit in the front seat.

I just smiled at him, not waiting to make conversation. I did not want him to think I was too comfortable.

He started, “So what’s your name?”

This question came after a few minutes of the car moving. I answered promptly and evenly, “Clara.” I did not ask him his name. He would tell me if he wished to tell me. If he did not tell me, he kept a vague sense of mystery for himself, which can often be mistaken for power. His feeling powerful could benefit me in the future. Besides, his name mattered not to me.

He continued, “You’ve no siblings have you, Clara?”

“No, I do not.” I answered.

“You’re record suggested so, yes.”

“My record? Would that not have my name?” I tried to catch the words as they left my mouth but it was too late. Perhaps that was a mistake. Mother always said I was too quick to say my mind. But she always said it with a smile. I did not feel like smiling. It had never really been an issue before. I rarely had the opportunity to converse with people other than mother. I channeled the panic into a blush and hoped he would only see the panic, but rather a flirtatious attempt to inquire the length and depth of his interest in me.

Light laughter confirmed the success of my efforts. “Yes, Clara, I asked as a formality, I suppose. Just to hear the sound of your voice. You don’t speak much on duty. Why is that?”

“I suppose I’ve nothing to say,” I suddenly became nervous that I’d sound dull, “or at least not to any of the other workers.”

“Oh? And have you anything to say to me, Clara?” I was torn between feeling victorious that he had stepped into my trap and feeling violated that he tainted the sound of my name.

“Well,” I considered for a moment but my wit appeared to be failing so I was left with nothing but unreliable honesty, “I have watched you on duty and find it fascinating to watch you interact with the other blue jackets. You smile a great deal for being on duty.”

He laughed again. “We have a decent time sometimes, yes. Usually we joke about sports or music, things of that nature, nothing too deep.”

“What would be ‘deep’?” I answered my own question and, consequently, became hyper aware of the locket around my neck. I didn’t dare touch it.

“Skipping the small talk I see,” this comment alone would’ve made me nervous but I simultaneously felt his hand move slowly onto my leg, so I knew he was still invested. “Deep would be talking about how we got here I suppose. Or what we really think of it here.”

I had no answer so I merely smiled. It had been a successful tactic so far.

The car halted in front of a dwelling that looked like 30 dwellings all in one. I stared for so long I didn’t see him get out of the car. He opened my door and gestured for me to exit. I felt uneasy about being seen here, but he didn’t seem to have any qualms. Though, I suppose it wouldn’t really matter to him. He leaned in and spoke through his smile, “Follow closely behind me but not too close. If anyone confronts you let me speak. You will be safer if you are silent.” His words though alarming were somehow comforting. Perhaps, he did not want to hurt me. It didn’t matter. Besides, I was in no place to be making such assumptions.

I did as he instructed, using my peripheral vision to scan for clues. We passed a door slightly ajar. From the opening, I saw papers in various piles all over the desk. The door was labelled, “general.” I assume this is where my answers will be. I also assume this is the most dangerous place for me to be.

I continue to follow the blue jacket whose name I still do not know. We walk up stairs like they have in some of the Facilities. I have never imagined a dwelling with stairs. He walked with his back very straight and both his hands at his sides.

We reached a room in the corner at the top of the stairs. He opened the door and gestured for me to enter the room. I did. He followed and closed the door behind him. The room was large. It had a bed and windows with sheets over them. Our windows have never had sheets over them. After taking in the cleanliness and size of the room, I turned to face the blue jacket. I was

surprised to see he had removed his blue jacket. I suppose I knew he would have removed it at some point. My surprise mostly stemmed from how his whole being seemed to change. He seemed gentler.

He approached me slowly. "Are you afraid of me, Clara?"

I answered honestly, "A bit."

His smile was a completely different smile from the one he sported earlier. This smile was real. "My name is William, Clara."

It seemed less like he was destroying my name now and more like he was fixing something that someone else had destroyed.

"William." I repeated.

"You needn't be scared, Clara." He kissed me softly on the lips. Softer than I had expected him too.

His actions progressed, but he never became too rough. Of course, I was still frightened. I tried to focus on other things. I tried to remember songs we used to sing as children when we walked to dining hour. I mostly thought of the locket around my neck, making sure it was still there. It slide around to the back of my neck. He never removed it and the locket never opened.

I stayed very still until I felt his breath pattern even. While I was still I drew a map in my head, retracing my steps to get to the room that said 'general,'

Now wearing only the locket, I felt around in the dark to find something to cover myself. I felt tears blur my vision. I had been so focused on finding my answers my tears had to remind me I was violated and frightened and unsure and without a plan.

I found William's blue jacket and moving slowly and quickly I pushed my arms through it. I could barely see him in the dark but I could hear him breathing. He could be worse, I considered. I wondered just briefly if maybe, just maybe, if he weren't a blue jacket or if I weren't an orange shirt, if maybe we would've been friends. If I would actually feel something for him or him for me. If we would be together and have a child and give her a locket with a picture of us in it. I brush a tear off my cheek and send the thought with it.

I cracked the door just slightly so the light didn't stir William. The dwelling was very still. I assumed it must be late in the evening. I hoped everyone was still asleep. I hoped my heartbeat did not sound as loud to others as it did to me. I feared it would wake the whole dwelling. I followed the map in my head all the while making a plan for if I were to get caught. I was looking for the bathroom. This one seemed the most promising. I made it to the room that said 'general.' I inhaled deeply and stored the air in my lungs, as if I was rationing the air from the last breath I'd ever take. I placed my right hand on the door knob, the left on the locket. I turned the knob. There was no answer, but the door was not locked. I pushed the door forward and released the knob so I could maybe say the door opened on it's own. The room was empty. I quickly stepped in and shut the door behind me. I forgot everything I was looking for. Still holding the locket, I shut my eyes to searched for the list. I opened my eyes quickly after I shut them, as I felt very vulnerable with them closed.

*Why only the orange shirts die the way my mother did.* I knew I had more questions to answer but this was the only question I could remember. I approached the files. I did not touch them at first. It almost seemed as though I thought they were poisoned. I leaned over the desk to read them. They were names. They were all lists of names. Some of them I recognized, they

were all orange shirts. I looked more closely. They were all orange shirts who had died from the illness that makes you feel like the sun. The illness that took my mother. I felt sick. I flipped through the papers to the last name on the list. And there she was. My mother's name.

They took her. Not just her they took all of us. I understood why my mother said "they" the way she did. Like it was a poison. *That must be it*, I thought, *poison*. That's what the illness is. That's why they sometimes do headcounts at dining hour. To see who is sitting where. I wondered how my mother knew she was next. My head ached from all the unanswered question. I stumbled away from the papers and saw pictures on the wall. They all depicted blue jackets. I assumed the largest one in the center must be the general. I had never seen him on duty but he had a strangely familiar face. I considered where else I might've seen him when I saw it. I wasn't even looking for it, I just saw it. A small decorative stone on the desk, with an eye scratched into it. Identical to the locket.

Time stopped. I felt dizzy. I could only see the picture. My hand fumbled around the locket until it flipped open. I uncrumpled the small picture and, despite all my hopes, I was right. There he was. Behind my mother. Only he didn't smile in the picture of the wall. His eyes were very dull, almost vacant.

This man killed my mother. This man, who is my father, killed my mother. *He was placed in a different dwelling*. That's what my mother told me. Why was he blue jacket and we were not. Why did he abandon us. Why did he not spare my mother. Who made him a blue jacket. How did he end up as the general.

I grasped the edge of the desk to find my balance. The door opened. And right before me, the man who killed my mother.

“Why did you kill her?” My voice trembled and cracked. The words delivered smoother in my head.

“Clara.”

He knew exactly who I was. He knew exactly who she was. And he killed her anyway.

“You killed her.” the words barely made it out. They squeaked like the door to my dwelling. I had never heard anything sound so weak.

“Young lady,” he straightened his back and placed his hand on his belt, as if he could erase the moment when he said my name. “I don’t know how you got in here but I suggest...”

“Why did you?” his face froze, his mouth shaped around whatever word he meant to contaminate the air with next.

I looked at his face and I tried to remove it from here. I tried to put it back on the picture in the locket. I tried to imagine it smiling. I tried to imagine it holding mother. Holding me.

But I couldn’t. I could only generate the imagine with his smile replaced by a grimace. Replaced by the face that came with the jacket.

“What makes you so different?” The anger that had been gathering inside me manifested itself in that one question. What makes him different from us? What makes him different from the foreign man, smiling on the picture in locket?

“I,” his voice broke, “had to separate myself accordingly. Your mother is...” he paused “was a member of the...” another pause, “*other* race.” He looked as if he expected me to answer. “We are only trying to purify our society.”

“Our.” I spit. He said it as if I were a part of it. As if he were reading off some report and I supposed to nod mindlessly in agreement.

“Clara,” he stepped toward me and stopped, “you are half clean.”

“So I am also half unclean,” I would much rather be half mother than half of you.

“I am willing to negotiate based on your particular situation. Anyone else from your class, having seen what you've seen, would have no such privilege.”

*Don't believe anything they tell you.* “I won't be *negotiating* anything with you.” I would rather die.

“You leave me no choice, Clara.” He looked almost genuinely reluctant, and he pulled the gun from his belt, where his hand had been resting.

I looked him in the eyes. I remembered my mother. All she went through that I couldn't understand until now. And I was not afraid to die, not if this world was the world I had to live for.

A gunshot. Had that been it? Had he missed? I felt no pain. I theorized for a moment that this might be what happens when one dies. To everyone around you, you are dead, but you continue to exist. He has still not pulled his eyes away from mine. I could not look away. I could not stop searching for answers. I could not stop trying to prove I was not afraid, even now.

Then, he fell. Clutching his chest, his hand red with blood. Behind where his body had once been, stood William with a gun pointed forward. I felt confused and disappointed. I had almost been looking forward to death. I relinquished any plan to continue living. The way William's eyes glazed over I imagined he also had no plan. His face looked different without the jacket.

He stepped toward me. *Don't believe anything they tell you. Don't believe anything they tell you.* I jumped at the chant of my mother's words. They flung me on the ground toward the corpse covers in a blue jacket turned red.

My hand trembled, cradling the gun. Deciding at whom it should be pointed.

"Clara," like treading on new ice at the start of winter. The man whose name may or may not be William slowly raised his hands, "Clara, you can trust me. We can do this together."

*Don't believe anything they tell you.*