The nights had been growing steadily warmer. A sickening fragrance of decomposing leaves lingered in the air as I made my way towards school.

And though I was desperately trying to remember a dream of pale sunlight, that I had been torn from violently no more than twenty minutes ago, I still felt grateful—

—grateful that the mornings were becoming lighter again, no longer forcing me to make this pitiful journey through pitch darkness.

And it was with these thoughts in mind that I became aware of a drifting presence.

Wandering, uncertain — regarding it's environment with the trepidation of a child.

It was a young woman, who didn't appear much older than twenty years of age.

From her sophisticated style and demeanor, I could immediately make out that she wasn't from around here.

And the second she noticed me, she approached — slowly at first, but more confidently once she picked up on my amenable nature.

Um, excuse me—

Could you help me?

I'm looking for a place called Fairview apartments.

There was panic in her eyes — and I empathized with her, as it wasn't long since I had been a newcomer in this town myself, just as lost as she was.

Soon, however, I'd landed a job as a newspaper delivery specialist — the first job I'd ever held — and it wasn't long before I'd grown familiar with every street and borough of this deceptively outstretched community.

I flashed her a reassuring smile.

Fairview? That's not far from here.

Just head back up the road and turn left at central square. You can't miss it.

She let out a sigh of relief.

So are you visiting someone who lives here?

Visiting—? Um, yes.

I'm visiting — myself.

I stared at her in confusion.

It's me, that lives there. But I just moved in yesterday afternoon, so I forgot um— the fastest way there.

She flashed me a silver key.

I really thought I wouldn't get lost this time.

Her voice turned melancholic.

It's not like I'm unfamiliar with these surroundings, you know?

I used to live here as a child, until I was about six years old. I've even visited a few times since then.

But things have changed. The town has expanded—

She stood there for a second, reminiscing, her fluttering blond hair shining in the early morning sun.

Anyway, I need to go home now.

To do, um—

I'm not really sure.

She smiled.

But I'll see you around.

See you—

And then she departed, just as cautiosly as she had appeared.

And with increased speed, I continued on towards school — fearing that this short delay would once more reinforce my persistent reputation of tardiness.

By the time I reached the ever cramped office of the Sunday Abbot, I was wholly out of breath.

But Ina — our ever punctual editor-in-chief — sat waiting on me.

There you are, Abe. Your irresponsibility never ceases to amaze me.

Even after bringing back your starting time to 9 A.M, you still manage to be late — every. single. week.

Sometimes I wonder if there's even a point—

I interrupted her.

What about Mei? She isn't here yet—

But Ina had already began opening the countless boxes, that had been dumped haphazardly across the room.

Well, at least you're not delaying the dispersal of important headlines—

—we've appeared to hit a dull news-season. With the municipal election campaigns waiting to start, it seems that there really isn't much to report on.

She pouted.

Isn't there any political gossip to write about?

Nothing. They're keeping their lips sealed.

But you just wait until the elections begin. The mud flinging will be out in full force.

What we're witnessing now is the silence before the storm. There'll be plenty of headlines before long.

The door swung open, and a blonde girl made a hurried entrance.

Time for work! Let's do our best today!

There, that's an attitude you could learn from — Abe.

But she was twenty minutes late—

Mei — ignoring my comment — had begun leafing through this week's edition of the Sunday Abbot.

Cool Ina! Your piece on the arched marble moth made it to the front page!

Ever since Mei's addition to the delivery team, we had worked out ways to distribute the paper as efficiently as possible — more than halving my regular labor-time in the process.

And although it was pleasant to free up some time on the weekends, the change had instantly presented Ina the opportunity to slash my already meager wages in half.

I couldn't deny the reality that I was undergoing a personal financial crisis.

Come on, Abe! We'll do the tenement buildings together. Then after that we can split up to do the rest of town.

After loading our delivery cart with three boxes worth of papers, we made our way in the direction of town.

The area beyond the school was sparsely developed, with only a few mansions rising up infrequently from behind spiked gates, each surrounded by acres of woodland.

While I pulled the cart, Mei looked over the subscription directory, stopping me at irregular intervals to deliver a paper or two at a house we passed by.

Can you smell it, Abe? Nature is blossoming.

This hardly feels like work, now that Spring is in the air.

Work smells like work — no way to mask it.

The scent of fresh printing-ink may seem nice at first, but at the end of the day I always have difficulty washing it from my hands.

And I end up smelling like I'm hot-off-the-press, far into Sunday afternoon.

Mei smirked.

That's how it is — isn't it?

But to be honest, I really don't mind the smell.

The ink we use has an earthy scent, like damp-moss, that pairs well with floral perfume—

Mei — I didn't know you were so metropolitan.

She blushed.

We arrived at a large residence.

Out in the yard I recognized a familiar face, eagerly awaiting our arrival.

There you are, kids. Fashionably late, as always.

Let me read the slander you're disseminating today.

Though not unfriendly, councilman Leopold — the town's disgraced marquis — always held a close eye on our attempts at journalism.

It wasn't long since he himself had been the subject of countless headlines, publicizing his dealings with the seedy underworld.

But recently Leopold appeared to have cleared up his act.

Grumbling appreciatively, he browsed through the newspaper.

Nothing written about you today?

He smiled.

No, it seems like Ina has retained her decorum.

I don't mind your paper reporting the news, you see—

—but it's when the line between the public and private sphere blurs, that I have my reservations about her journalism.

It isn't easy, you know? Being a public figure.

It becomes so much harder to indulge when everyone's watching you.

You slip up once — make one tiny mistake — and it's magnified a thousandfold.

I nodded compassionately.

It's a lonesome endeavor.

Do you know what my party has done to me, for the upcoming elections? They lowered me to eleventh place on the list.

Just out of spite over things that happened in the past—

Eleventh place? What does that mean?

It means the end — to my political career, that is.

My party, A.I.R., only holds eight seats in the town council, so I have zero chance of returning to my old position next year.

Maybe if you campaign really hard—

Forget about it. It's political homicide.

He scowled.

Just think of all the free time you'll have.

I'll need it—

To make matters worse, my deadbeat son is returning home this year after dropping out of university.

He was majoring in German romantic theater — or something of the sorts — but even that turned out too demanding for him.

And now he can't find a job for the life of him—

Can't you kids put him to work delivering papers—?

I think our team is pretty much complete.

He chuckled.

Well I can't blame you for keeping your distance. He's a real slacker, hasn't worked a day in his life—

—and still, he'd be the type to consider himself too good for this kind of labor.

Nobody is too good to deliver the Sunday Abbot!

Never mind.

Bernard is his name. You might catch him loitering around town.

I hope to have him off my hands soon.

We said goodbye to the grumbling marquis and made our way to the edge of town, where a working-class district lay that was irregularly littered with council houses.

We were welcomed by a loud bark.

Good morning Phyrrus! You're up early.

Phyrrus here has been helping me on Saturdays, by pulling the cart and protecting me against danger.

She reached out to give the dog a pat on the head—

—but in an instant, the dog lunged at her and sank it's teeth deep into her her arm.

Phyrrus! That hurt!

Please be careful, we don't have time to play.

The dog followed us at a safe distance.

Our work proceeded quickly, and it wasn't even lunchtime by the time we rounded the last tenement block.

We're doing great, Abe! Phyrrus and I'll take the cart and finish off the remaining suburbs.

You should have enough papers left to cover the city center.

Are you sure you'll be safe?

Don't worry Abe, I have Phyrrus with me.

That's what I was worried about—

I thanked Mei and we each went our own way.

Abbotsford's town center isn't large — and as I made my way from letterbox to letterbox, I thought to myself that Mei had truly drawn the shortest straw by agreeing to cover the suburbs.

Mei, however, appeared to derive a lot more satisfaction from our labor than I did — so it seemed fair that she would take on the lion's share of the workload.

Suddenly, I picked up a familiar voice.

Look, it's Abe — always the bearer of glad tidings.

I glanced in the direction where the sound came from and made out two girls, both of whom I knew from school.

This is Naomi, you may know her. She's on the swim team.

Naomi acknowledged me with a curt nod of her head.

So what are you girls doing here? Church isn't until tomorrow, right?

Of course it isn't, but we're helping with the preparation for the Sunday service.

We're here to do some routine maintenance on the church properties.

Can't the church afford to hire specialists for that kind of work?

It's just recurring tasks. Old buildings require a lot of upkeep—

As I followed them through the main entrance into the nave of the church, I could hear soothing tones seeping in through the walls.

That's the choir, they're practicing in the conservatory. I hope you don't mind the sound.

Rika beckoned me forward.

We headed down a short staircase and through a narrow corridor, that led into a crypt that was situated directly under the church.

In the faint light I could make out the walls. They were covered with engravings that appeared worn and faded, as though they had once been exposed to the elements.

Rika pointed upward.

There. There should be a light bulb above that door, but it isn't burning anymore. Are you tall enough to look behind there?

I stretched myself to see over the casing of the door, where I could barely discern a small light socket.

I can probably reach it, but it's pretty high up. Can't you just use a step-ladder.

Naomi giggled.

I mean, we could. But just think of all the spiders that live up there—

Please help us Abe — now that you're here anyway.

I reached over the door with my hand until I felt the smooth surface of an incandescent bulb. Carefully I unscrewed it, setting a fine stream of age old dust pouring downward over my clothes.

The bulb came loose. I stepped down and held it to Rika's ear, shaking it, so that a rattling sound became clearly audible.

A burnt out bulb, just as I thought. But don't worry—

She dug around in her uniform pockets.

—we bought a new one. This one uses advanced Light Emitting Diode technology. It should last much longer and save the church on electricity.

Smirking, I took the bulb from her and carefully screwed it into it's socket.

When I was nearly done it began to emit a blinding light.

I had to catch myself to retain my balance, as the entire crypt — that had been steeped in darkness just a moment ago — was suddenly illuminated.

There, that wasn't too much trouble. Was it?

As my eyes grew accustomed to the light, I became aware of my surroundings.

We were standing inside a windowless catacomb. Large stone slabs covered the walls around us, every one of them inscribed with time-worn glyphs.

Some places are better kept in darkness—

Oh not at all — do you see these stones?

Do you know where they come from?

They look like gravestones to me—

Rika smiled.

That would be right.

You should take a look at the dates on these stones.

Some date back to the early fourteen-hundreds.

When this village was still and island—

Did you know there used to be a different church on Abbot?

It used to serve the congregation, up until 1653.

It's ruins can still be visited, close to the southern point.

It had an adjacent graveyard.

But I'm afraid the encroaching sea made for watery graves.

Salt water ate at its foundations, rotting away the wood and making the stone walls tilt over threateningly.

When a large winter storm swept away the cemetery gates — one dark December night — the community decided it was time to build a new and more splendid church, on higher laying land.

That's the building we're now standing in.

Construction began immediately, although work was halted many times in pursuit of new funding.

All stone and other building supplies had to be transported from the mainland. And when funds ran out, many stones were taken from the old church to complete the project.

After forty years of construction, the new church was completed — and our place of worship was moved to this new location.

The dead, however, stayed behind in their old cemetery.

There the remains of our forefathers languished beneath the skeleton of a decrepit chapel, constantly threatened by the washing sea.

And the reverend Kuyper, my great forefather, decided that something was to be done.

Now that work on the new church was finished, the villagers commenced with the process of moving the dead to the new location.

They began with the graves that were in immediate danger of being swallowed by the sea.

But, as you can figure, it was unpopular work. No one found joy in digging up old bones—

—and moving the graveyard grew into an effort that spanned multiple centuries, often lying still for decades.

It wasn't until the beginning of the twentieth century, that the last of the graves was moved to dry land.

Rika glared at us ominously, while a silver sheen glistened through her pitch-black hair.

Naomi sat looking at Rika, an expression of discomfort filling her eyes.

And even then, some say at least a few graves must have been overlooked — their contents swept into the endless deep of the ocean.

Oh Abe, I apologize, we've been keeping you from your work. And to think that it's almost lunch time.

Won't you have lunch with us? Naomi packed sandwiches.

Come on Naomi, after our hard work, I say we've deserved a break. We'll finish decorating in the afternoon.

We climbed back up the stairs and settled among the pews.

I made these at home, please let us share them together.

I hope you didn't have other plans for lunch.

I shook my head.

Usually I don't even get around to eating on days like these—

Naomi handed me a sandwich.

So how have you been doing, Abe? Are you fully prepared for finals?

I grumbled a reply.

Oh and — I haven't received your submission form for easter break yet.

Could you hurry up and fill one out? We're running short of applicants.

I looked up from my meal.

Easter break?

Haven't you seen the notices at school?

It's our yearly school outing — where we go to stay at the beach for a few days, as a last escapade before finals start.

We'll hold nightly study sessions, but mainly it will be a care-free vacation.

Naomi and I are on the organizing committee together—

Rika took out a small form from her purse.

Please fill this out as soon as possible. You wouldn't want to miss easter break.

And let me know if you can think of anyone else who would be interested in attending—

As registration is low this year, anyone is welcome. Not just graduate students.

Rika winked.

I hope you own a pair of swimming trunks.

Thoughtlessly I slipped the piece of paper into my pocket.

Emphasizing that I really needed to return to work, I thanked the girls and said goodbye.

And with a well-filled stomach I moved onward through the Saturday streets, which had come alive with the bustle of pedestrians enjoying their weekend.

But I couldn't deny that my conversation with Rika and Naomi had stirred a certain anxiety in me.

The truth was that finals were rapidly approaching. My continuously increasing obligations towards the school paper, as well as my leisurely approach to life, had not left much time for study.

I would have to double down on my efforts. And I resolved halfheartedly to start studying that very evening.

In less than an hour I managed to complete the houses around central square and the shopping district, where few subscribers lived.

When suddenly—

—I was struck by a strong sensation of deja-vu.

Good afternoon, out and about again?

I—I am!

Thank you for your clear directions this morning. I found my way home in a heartbeat.

You're so knowledgeable about the lay-out of this town—

It comes with the job description.

I presented her with an issue of the Sunday Abbot.

Here, take one — we always have plenty left at the end of the day.

A weekly newspaper—?

Curiously, she looked it over.

That's wonderful — for a town like this.

Are you on the board of editors?

Not officially, although I stand in at times—

She smiled.

Well, it must be exciting, with the elections coming up.

Thank you so much for this. I'll make sure to get a subscription.

Please don't feel obliged to—

No. I definitely will. As soon as I get home—

—which is in that general direction, isn't it?

She pointed northward, towards the edge of town.

I sighed.

Follow me — I'll pass by your place in a little bit. Just a few more stops along the way.

Oh thank you, Abe. I got lost again.

I shouldn't have taken that right turn at the mini mart—

I followed my course, with Marisa trailing after me, until we approached Fairview apartments.

Outside of the main entrance, she turned around and looked at me with a bright smile.

You saved me again, I would be lost without you.

Please come upstairs. I'll make you some tea—

—as I have no other way to thank you.

We made our way up the spartan concrete staircase and through a narrow corridor, before entering her flat.

I apologize for causing you so much trouble.

Normally I'm very independent — you should know that.

It's just that this is my first time truly living on my own.

She wrung her hands nervously.

I mean — when I was in college, I lived with roommates in a shared apartment.

We were independent, but we divided the chores. I mainly did the laundry.

And the other girls would cook and clean.

And now that I'm living by myself, it feels like I'm doing everything simultaneously.

I've been getting lost — around town, even though this place is far smaller than the city — but also in my head.

I think it's just that I've had so much on my mind—

Just a minute — the tea should be ready.

She bounded into the kitchen, where I could hear her rattling with teacups.

And I remained in the empty studio appartment — which, although neatly furnished, still had a certain impersonal feel to it, as though it hadn't been fully made into a home.

I made Earl Grey. I hope you like it, as it's all I've got.

She let out a melancholy sigh.

Student life is nothing like the real world, you know?

You're sheltered, cared for — you have your path set out for you.

But now that's all over — and a grand, open future beckons me.

So why did you come to Abbotsford?

Oh I like this town. I used to live here, back when I was very small.

Didn't I tell you?

And I'm not just freeloading. I have a job. A real job!

Although I won't be starting it just yet—

She grew silent.

What kind of job—?

Oh I cant tell you — not until next week.

Because it's a secret—

And I know what you journalists are like.

She shivered, giddily.

But I have a job! I can't even fathom it—

I'm on the fast lane to success.

Soon it won't be lukewarm tea — but champagne filling these cups.

She broke out in animated laughter, as I felt a strange tingle make it's way down the back of my neck.

Marisa got up. She walked over to the corner of the room to pick up her shopping bag — which she had discarded thoughtlessly upon entry — and brought out a packet of cinnamon buns.

Here, have something to eat. It's already passed lunch time.

I was about to decline, but she had already handed me a roll, and I saw no polite way to return it.

I realize you must be on your way, but you won't be able to deliver papers on an empty stomach.

After no less than three cinnamon buns, I exited Fairview apartments.

The day had progressed, and I was borne down, physically as well as mentally, by the weight of the newspapers that remained in my bag.

And though I encountered people sitting in their gardens, basking temptingly in the early spring sun, I vowed solemnly not to be held up until I had delivered the remainder of my route.

I must persevere. The people depend on me.

It wasn't much later that I came across a bent over figure, slowly making her way in my direction.

Hi Mei. How are you getting along?

From under her worn appearance, she flashed me a vulnerable smile.

I'm okay, Abe. I worked really hard, I only have the West End to do.

She cast a glance at my messenger bag.

But wow. You look like you're almost done—

You must have had a tough afternoon.

I chuckled awkwardly.

I'm really tired. And to be honest, I'm starved.

How about we stop for a late lunch together—

She smiled apologetically.

My belly protested in all it's overindulgence.

While I had been spending the afternoon socializing, Mei must have been working uninterruptedly.

I could hardly confess to her that I'd already eaten two full meals.

You know what?

I'd love to, it's just—

She stared at me hopefully.

—I've been feeling a little nauseous lately.

I'm going to finish my round quickly, before going to bed—

But please eat something for my sake.

You're ill—?

A worried expression had come over her.

Nauseous—? It could be a fever—

You better hurry home quickly. Let me deliver the rest of your papers.

I could feel the blood rushing to my head.

No, no—

I'm fine. Hard work will set me free.

Bent over in shame, I hurried towards the last mailboxes of the day.

In the months leading up to finals, the school days were short and filled with repetition.

Spring has come early this year.

Look outside, the Tilia are budding — but it won't last long, you know?

If we have a cold spell in April, the new foliage will freeze to death.

Nature punishes presumptuousness harshly—

She turned away from the window.

But anyway—

The two of you did a great job, last Saturday.

I'll need you to keep up that attitude over the coming weeks, as the electoral campaigns will be starting next Wednesday.

Although we're just a weekly paper, we're the only dedicated news source this town has.

That means whenever something big happens, our reporting will be the focus point of all national media.

If something big happens—

She stared away into the distance.

These elections are a chance for the Sunday Abbot to break into the national headlight—

So I'll need you at your sharpest.

Suddenly she giggled.

And you should hear this—

Currently, the parties are in the process of announcing their leading candidates.

Flock 05 — the town's second party — just published a press release this morning.

Their party has been in trouble lately, as their previous frontrunner was arrested on domestic abuse charges.

He hasn't been convicted yet, but it's a bad look for them.

Ahead of the coming elections, Flock has been searching frantically for a new leader.

But just look at who they've chosen.

She presented me with a press release on her phone. I immediately recognized the accompanying photograph.

I coughed.

A person with no experience at all.

Apparently she just graduated from law school. Dabbled a little in student politics.

And she did some — modeling work?

Ina snickered.

I couldn't think of a more incompetent candidate — but let's not be too quick to write her off.

Are you sure that's her? She looks an awful lot like someone I crossed paths with last Saturday.

Crossed paths with—?

I think so. But she didn't strike me as the type to lead a political movement, if you know what I mean.

What was her name again? Marisa—

Marisa Drexler, that's right. Het name is in the press release.

And you're saying you ran in to her? Maybe she was here for deliberations.

She'll probably move here sometime soon. You need to be a legal resident of Abbotsford to run for office.

I smiled.

She does have an apartment already — though I'm not sure if she's fully aware of it herself.

Ina ignored my remark. From the sound of her right index finger rapidly tapping against her skirt, I could tell that she was coming up with a scheme.

She turned to me with a serious expression in her eyes.

I think this could be a good thing, Abe.

This year, I want to take a deep dive into the individual campaigns.

Flock 05, as a movement, has been on the rise for a good number of years. Their politics are popular under a large section of disenfranchised voters.

Some voices speculate that they could even form a sincere challenge to the political establishment of our town.

I want to kick off the campaign season with an extra thick edition, providing an overview of all contesting parties.

Ex—extra thick?

My shoulder still felt cramped from last Saturday.

I want in-depth interviews with the leading candidates of every party.

I can do the mayor, and the smaller opposition leaders.

And I'd like you to interview Marisa.

An interview? Me—?

Yeah, you. It sounds like you already have one foot in the door with her. We can't let a good opportunity go to waste.

This is a large responsibility, Abe. Please don't disappoint me.

Ina took place behind her desk, ordering papers and humming to herself in a contented manner.

It appeared that my presence was no longer needed.

And I was already on my way to the door — my mind set on returning home before Ina could lay anymore unsolicited work on me — when a question sprang to mind.

I turned around.

Hey Ina — I was wondering.

Have you ever been on easter break?

Ina looked up from her paperwork. A gloomy expression forming in her eyes.

Easter break—?

Why — are you going?

I—I don't think so. Are you—?

Easter break—? Me—?

That's where the stuck-up types loaf around on the beach under the pretense of study—

I have absolutely — definitely — no interest in being part of that.

Before I could even make it to the end of the corridor, I was aproached by Rika Kuyper.

Abe, I'm so glad to run it to you. You're just the person I was looking for.

That can't be true—

Oh but it is. For I have something newsworthy to report, and for that reason I need — a journalist.

She stared up at me with pleading eyes — though I could detect a certain playfulness in her voice.

Sometimes, involving the press is the only way to achieve true righteousness in this world. They don't call it the fourth estate for nothing, do they?

I really don't think I'm the right person for this— Ina's in her office, all leads can be submitted to her.

Her face fell.

Come on Abe, you know how Ina feels about me—

Please come with me for a bit, I want to show you something.

I really—

Don't worry, it's on the way home for you. It'll only take a minute.

Begrudgingly I followed her.

Rika walked next to me in a confident pace, so that I had to increase my tempo to keep up with her.

And as we walked, she seemed thrilled with herself, grinning with a mysterious sense of anticipation.

Though I'm not easily thrown off my game, her lingering silence made me the slightest bit uncomfortable.

So how did your service go, yesterday?

She moaned favourably.

No more lights that burnt out—?

It's all about preparation.

No ritual can go without rehearsal.

Ritual is rehearsal, or so they say.

She shot me an inquisitive glance.

We were walking down lightkeepers lane — a picturesque trail that led to the woodlands in the southeast.

Great plum trees rose up on both sides of the path, arching together into a canopy of green.

Rika—?

Yes—?

That thing you want to show me—

I paused for a second, to catch my breath.

It isn't really on the way home — is it?

She put a finger to her mouth.

Oh quiet now — this is a shortcut.

Anyway, we're almost there.

The lines of trees grew thicker, turning into a forest.

And after a while the path gave way to a clearance, in the midst of which there stood a ruin.

Vanity of vanity — all is vanity.

There it lies, what remains of our old church.

As you can see, many stones have been taken away and repurposed.

And these ruins wither under the force of the elements, stones crumbling—

Currently we're standing at the place where the graveyard used to be, before graveyard relocation project took place.

In the past, the sea came up just a few yards from where we're standing. But after the reclamation of the surrounding land, the water slowly disappeared.

In the fickle daylight I gazed upon the desolated church, as it cast its lengthening shadows over the mossy forest floor.

Proper burial is of such pivotal importance within our faith.

For those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake — some to everlasting life.

We believe, upon the second coming of our lord and savior, that burial forms a prerequisite for entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

I felt a shiver down my spine.

But let me get to the point.

Over the course of the centuries, three-hundred-twenty-six headstones were transported to the new church's crypt. Three-hundred-twenty-six caskets were buried underneath.

The thing is, not all of these caskets held our dead.

Are you saying some of the graves were empty?

Empty, yes, or even worse — they held the remains of strangers.

It happened in the beginning of the previous century.

In 1934 we were close to exhuming the last of the old graves.

Only forty headstones remained, and a large concerted effort was undertaken to complete the remaining work and close the old graveyard for good.

It was during summer that an esteemed scientist visited our island.

Doctor Bram Bulwer, chairholder at the department of Forensic Anthropology at Leiden University.

Bram's intentions were rather sinister. He seemed interested in creating an anatomical archetype of the inhabitants of the isle of Abbot.

In those days, among the nations elites, many prejudices existed against our people.

Considering how isolated our community was, we were an interesting case study — genetically speaking.

But back then, the islanders were clueless of the doctor's true intentions, and like we've always done with guests, we welcomed him in our midst and provided him with hospitality.

Bulwer did a lot of important work in our community — providing medical checkups to the elderly, and administering polio-shots to schoolchildren.

My grandmother still remembers how he came to their school, lining up the children by length and taking all their measurements. Their arms, their legs—

—their skulls.

Bulwer wasn't questioned at the time, as people still held medical experts in high regard—

Until he began involving himself with the exhumation of the graves.

Immediately upon his arrival on the island, he offered to help with the graveyard relocation project. And during the first few days he spent his every spare hour helping the digging crew.

But after a while this lead to uneasiness.

On multiple occasions, the doctor was accused of treating the exhumed remains without proper regard.

Taking skulls out of the graves, inspecting them, measuring them — treating them without the due reverence that should be observed during the handling of a deceased person.

It led to arguments, and the doctor agreed to cease his participation in the relocation project.

But even after this incident, Bulwer was spotted near the old graveyard a few times, observing the workers and the empty graves.

After four weeks, Bulwer departed for the mainland, never to return. And the islanders all but forgot about his mystifying persence.

Rika's face grew dark.

Until—

Until?

Until doctor Bulwer died, twenty years ago.

After his death, his personal archive was make public. A routine move by the university.

His writings shone a new light into his stay on the island.

A notebook from 1937 makes mention of ‘three Abbot skulls' that are in possession of the doctor.

That's the only time he mentions that term. ‘Three Abbot skulls'. Just as an aside.

And it can only be speculated what exactly took place.

But I — and many on the island with me — suspect that Bulwer must have snuck out one dark night, exhumed three graves, and replaced three of our skulls with other specimen from his undoubtedly vast collection, before carefully resealing the graves.

Thus leaving him in possession of three exceedingly rare skulls from the eccentric population of Abbot.

Are you saying the doctor went through all that trouble to steal some old bones?

He did — he stole the remains of our ancestors. To display them in a cabinet, as some kind of exotic curio.

We must return these remains, the Abbot skulls, so that we can bury them in our native soil.

These people, these poor souls, they have the right to a christian burial. This is of fundamental religious importance to us.

I looked at her uncomprehendingly.

Oh you may find my obsession morbid, but these bones tell the story of our people. Each of my ancestors has been buried on this island — far back into the dark ages.

It's a humbling thought, to have them all in one place. To know that I will, one day, lie among them — in the depths of the earth, protected by a sheltering church and a mighty God that rules from above.

Rika's eyes shone in an exalted glare, and I realized she could continue preaching like this for hours.

Listen Rika, I'm running late. Maybe we could continue this conversation at a later—

It's okay. I'm done.

All I want to ask you—

You see—

After Bulwer's archives were published, we petitioned the university to return the skulls.

But they only sent us a short reply — explaining that no record existed of skulls from Abbot, and that their mention in the notebook was likely an error.

After that all our further pleas went unanswered.

We need someone — someone with journalistic inlets — to look further into this case.

To do due research. To find out everything there is to know about these skulls, and to publicize the whole, dark, matter — so that the university will be forced to reveal the skeletons in it's closet.

She looked up, at the setting sun.

I apologize, Abe. It's growing late and I've led you astray.

I'm beginning to realize this really wasn't much of a shortcut.

It wasn't — was it?

But I know a quicker way back to town, that leads through the fields.

I promise we'll have you home before sundown.

She took me down an overgrown track that led us out of the woods. Within a few minutes, we came upon a little used trail that ran through the tulip fields.

We have picked the season—

Pretty, aren't they—?

If a few days these flowers will all be harvested, and flown in cooled crates to places all across the globe.

She pointed towards a purple spotted flower.

Just imagine — this poor thing could be wilting in a vase in Beijing by the end of the week.

To imagine that something of such beauty would await such a cruel fate.

But eventually that is the path of all things radiant.

It just shows that we truly live in a fallen creation — that groans under the consequences of our sin.

Vanity of vanity — all is vanity.

She sighed.

At least the farmers get a chance to harvest gold.

A batch of these tulips will fetch a small fortune at auction.

And come May, the land is plowed and wheat is sown, and the cycle goes on as usual.

When Wednesday came, I suddenly remembered the interview I'd been asked to conduct with Marisa, the scatterbrained girl that I'd met last Saturday.

With our deadline approaching rapidly, I pondered what my next move should be. Ina couldn't expect me — realistically — to produce a quality interview on such a short notice.

And where to start? I didn't even have her phone number.

I was sure that if I'd just show up at her door, out of the blue, she'd be sure to reject me—

A rejection—

—that's what I needed.

If could simply tell Ina that the girl had refused to grant me an interview, I'd be set free.

And then Ina would be able to interrogate her on a later date.

Driven by these motivations — and without any prior preparation — I found myself knocking on the door of Marisa's apartment.

An interview—?

Yes, for our paper. It shouldn't take more than a few hours of your time, but I understand if you're busy—

Busy—? Not at all!

You've caught me a little off guard, but I'd love to give an interview.

A sinking feeling took hold of me.

You must have heard about my appointment as the new leading candidate for Flock 05.

I'm so sorry I couldn't tell you last Saturday. I was under strict orders to keep it a secret until our press release went out on Sunday night.

And now you want to conduct an interview? A real interview?!

She was beaming.

Oh this is all so exciting.

I was a bit disappointed, you know? You're the first local press outlet to contact me about my new position.

We're the only local press outlet—

I want to tell you everything about our movement.

But — um. I was actually in the middle of something. My apartment is a mess.

Please meet me in the café across the street in twenty minutes. We'll conduct the interview there.

As I sat in the empty cafe, tenderly sipping a triple ristretto, a thousand thoughts passed through my mind.

Part of me was ready to escape, now it was still possible — hastily scribbling an excuse note on a piece of paper before winging it out the door.

But simultaneously I found myself making up potential interview questions, as a fickle attempt to alleviate the very worst outcome.

Because I realized I probably wouldn't have the nerve to escape — that I would remain sitting here, caught like a deer in headlights, counting down the seconds until my inescapable demise.

And there she was. As I saw her approaching through the window, I noticed something luminous in her appearance, that I hadn't detected back when I saw her in the hallway.

This is a great place, isn't it? So close by.

And easy to find your way home from—

Don't tease me, I've been doing a lot better.

I bought a map, you know—

Anyway, I'm very glad you're willing to talk to me. Though some national papers ran our press release, you're the first journalist to show interest in our actual story.

But please go easy on me today, you should know I've only been instated recently.

That's right. I heard there was an issue with your predecessor—

My predecessor, Jurgen—

She blushed.

Let's not talk about him at all. I believe the gutter press have uncovered all of his shady dealings.

She lowered her voice.

New political parties attract all kinds of, um— characters, you know? When you're building up a movement, it isn't always possible to separate the wheat from the chaff.

But I think we've left these days behind. I want us to look towards the future, not the past.

We've dealt with Jurgen in a responsible manner — and now we're ready to turn the page.

You can quote me on that, verbatim. Are you taking notes?

Hastily I produced a notebook from my bag.

Um, yeah—

I was trying to recall some of the questions that I had prepared before Marisa's entry — none of which I'd thought to write down.

So, eh— Could you tell me something about your goals as a leader?

I mean— What would you do if you were elected?

She shuffled anxiously.

Well, that's the real question, isn't it—

She thought long and hard.

Flock 05 wants to bring balance and safety.

Many things have become unbalanced in our town.

A.I.R. — Abbotsford's largest party — has ruled continuously for the last sixty years.

And though they seem like an obvious choice for those seeking stability, we believe their sole rulership has lead to a steady decline.

Nothing immediate or life threatening — but small things.

Like the social cohesion in our town, the sense of safety on the streets, rising corruption.

Many things that were once commonplace, have all but disappeared.

And as this disappearance was a gradual process, spanning many decades — it has passed many by.

Until 2005, when a small group of concerned citizens joined forces against the rising tide. Working hard to provide a political alternative to the time-worn status quo.

Even as an opposition party, Flock has been able to achieve so much for our community—

She clasped her hands together forcefully.

And now, we believe we're ready to rule.

These are fighting words for a new frontrunner—

D—does it really sound that way?

She shuffled around nervously in her seat.

You can tone it down a little in the article—

She eyed me self-consciously.

Please don't paint me in too bad a light.

You may have heard people speak negatively about our movement. Stating that we are extremists of some kind.

But you must understand that there is nothing extreme about our aims.

All we want is to live in a fair and safe society. Isn't that the most moderate stance of all?

She smiled a tender smile.

But you know how it goes. Whenever you challenge the powers that be, they'll do anything to paint you in a bad light.

We've been called vandals, authoritarians, bullies.

You should realize, we're nothing like that. They call us names in order to cast doubt on our intentions.

Politics can be horrible at times.

Exactly! But it's a game — you see?

I need to be resillient.

A waitress came by to take Marisa's order. I got up to visit the restroom.

While we had been speaking, the café had slowly filled up.

And as I made my way to wash my hands, a young man brushed by me.

He turned around.

How are the madeleines here?

The madeleines—?

I have no idea—

He grinned playfully.

You don't—?

Having your doubts already?

With these words he slipped through the door.

When I returned to the seating area, Marisa sat behind a steaming cup of latte.

She gestured towards the young man, who had seated himself at a nearby table, where he read his paper auspiciously.

Dit that guy say anything to you?

There was a hint of acrimony in her voice.

That guy? He asked me about the confectionery.

The confectionery? That's strange, isn't it?

I don't know — it was just a question.

She pouted.

He shouldn't be asking questions like that.

Anyway, let us return to the interview. I was telling you about the core principals of our party.

At Flock we are realists. We do not delude ourselves with soothing fairy tales about human benevolence.

She had become serious, uttering her words calmly and clearly. There was little that reminded me of the timid, forlorn girl that I'd learnt to know last Saturday

We believe society constitutes no more than a thin veneer of civility, that hides away the true horrors of human nature.

This is a subject I've explored extensively during my studies.

In the natural state, without rules and institutions to enforce peace, humans are in a constant condition of struggle.

We'd live in continual fear of violent death, our lives solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, short—

A good government needs to be fair and strong, to withhold man from it's natural inclinations towards violence.

And we are ready to take that position away from the current political elite — that has become the very embodiment of that which it once vowed to protect us from.

How many votes would you need to have a shot at winning the mayoral office?

She pondered.

Hm— Quite a bit more than we currently have.

And A.I.R. would have to lose some.

She hushed her voice.

But we have a secret weapon.

An influential politician will be joining our party soon. To back me up, as my right hand man.

We should be able to release his name somewhere next week.

But you know— you can go ahead and hint at it in your article. To create some suspense.

I promise you, he's an established political figure. I believe his backing will truly push our movement into the lead—

A stir beside us.

Sounds like you've been getting mixed up in sleazy circles again, Madeleine—

It was the young man, who had switched over to a table closer to ours.

Marisa's entire demeanor changed in an instant.

You stay out of this!

You haven't changed a bit, Madeleine. And it appears that you've found a new victim.

He leaned over to me.

Don't be fooled by her charm. You wouldn't be the first young man to succumb to her wiles.

Ignore him, Abe. Let's continue the interview.

Bernard here is a terrible person. A bully.

At university, he would always hang around with a band of low-lives. Wreaking havoc, causing trouble for the students that actually tried to accomplish something in their lives.

Such as taking charge of an authoritarian movement—?

Nonsense. Come on, he's ruining the interview.

Let's go up to my apartment.

Up to her apartment already?

You're a lost cause, young man. Sic transient gloria mundi.

Fuming, Marisa pulled me out of the establishment

Marisa sighed.

Do you see what's happening? You can't even go for a quiet conversation without being harassed in this town.

What a nuisance that Bernard is. I hope he goes away soon.

He's probably visiting his dad, who lives down here. Poor man.

She clasped her hands together tenderly.

Anyway, I think I have enough material for a decent article. The piece should be out next Sunday, together with interviews with the other party leaders.

Thank you for the interview.

She hesitated—

Please don't paint me in a bad light. As I said, our movement hasn't always been treated fairly by the press.

And it causes prejudices. Like these things Bernard came up with—

But I feel that you're a sincere reporter. Who would be willing to give us a chance.

If you treat us fairly, I may be able to help you—

She grew serious.

To help you — with a revelation.

I know things, about the political elite in this town.

About the mayor.

Mayor Van Linden? What do you know about him?

It's too soon, I can't tell. But lets talk again.

She scribbled something down on a piece of paper.

Here's my number, I'm sure we'll be in contact a lot during the campaign season.

We headed to the door.

Oh yeah, are you going on the easter break outing?

Easter break? I—I'm not sure—

Rika invited me, I thought it might be fun.

Rika— You met Rika—?

Yes, her father is in the town council, you know?

He's a politician for A.I.R. — but a respectable one.

Well it sounds like her — I think she's inviting everyone.

You should know easter break is mostly aimed at high-school students.

Her lip sank down sullenly.

You think so? I though it would be fun, as a relief from politics.

How about you let me know if you decide to go. Then at least I'll have someone to talk to.

You have my number.

On Saturday, Mei and I took to our paper route the way we'd grown accustomed to.

Unlike last week, work proceeded with few distractions — and it was just after noon that I found myself heading back to school to drop off my leftover newspapers.

Good afternoon, Abe. Any news for me today?

I looked around to see marquis Leopold, coming down the street behind me.

Sure, we dropped it in your mailbox this morning. Haven't you found it yet?

You have—? My mistake.

I haven't been home all day, you see?

Well, it should be in there.

I'd go read it if I were you. It's a special edition to mark the start of the campaign season.

Ah, that's exactly the kind of news that I subscribed for — not that nonsense about dying insects.

He headed over to his mailbox to retrieve the paper.

That's a nice picture of Marisa you have on the front page.

You like her? She's the main rival to your party this year.

Leopold grinned.

I agree that A.I.R. was once my party.

Are you still torn up about your low placement on the electoral list?

Et tu, Brute?

He sighed.

They have betrayed me — ended my political career.

You get in one little scandal, and this is what they do to you.

A.I.R. does claim to be a Christian party, you know—

To hell they are — these damn puritans will never let me live it down.

They should have taken the honorable path and just thrown me out — but to avoid commotion and to humiliate me even further, they placed me on a unelectable position.

He glanced over Marisa's image again.

But I feel that I may still have a part to play.

I've been in talks with the leadership of Flock 05 over the past few weeks. And this morning, they've agreed to let me grace the second place on the ballot for their party these upcoming elections.

You—? Second place for Flock? That's quite a turnabout—

An official press release will go out tomorrow evening, so please keep this between the two of us for now.

But I reckon — with my experience and Marisa's charisma — we'll be able to elevate this shady club into a true political juggernaut.

A.I.R. will regret double crossing me. Just mark my words.

Suddenly a figure appeared in the doorway of Leopold's house.

And when it emerged into the afternoon sun, I realized that it was Bernard.

Initially he made a disgruntled impression — but the second he recognized me, his spirits appeared to lift.

Hi Abe! Is that bed-wetting old grandpa bothering you?

Leopold chuckled.

I see you've met my deadbeat son?

He receives free food and board — and this is how he thanks me.

You need to support your poor son a little, now that he's standing on his own two feet.

Or am I interfering with your illicit dealings.

Nothing here is illicit—

With a wink, Leopold excused himself — though I could tell he was irked by Bernard's banter.

Congratulations on finishing university—

I haven't exactly finished university—

—although you could say I'm finished with it.

He was staring after his father — who carefully moved his way up the stairs to the house, the Sunday Abbot clasped flimsily under his arm.

Pathetic—

He's got a penchant for trouble, that man.

He sighed.

I always thought local politics would be an outlet for him, a harmless way to keep him occupied.

But it appears he can't stop embarrassing himself.

Suddenly he grabbed me by the arm, jovially.

I apologize, young man. I didn't really have the chance to introduce myself to you when we met last Thursday—

—although I'm sure Madeleine has filled you in.

You studied with her in Bremersberg?

Sure. In different faculties though — I mostly dabbled in German Literature, some Theater—

I wrote my last essay on Almansor.

You wouldn't be partial to the works of Heinrich Heine, would you?

I shook my head.

I was reminded of something that Rika had asked me to do.

Hey Bernard, while you were studying, did you ever come across the department of Forensic Anthropology?

Anthropology? I hope you don't want to measure my jaw-alignment—

No, it's nothing like that.

A friend of me is very interested in skulls — for some reason.

She will graduate high school this year, and wants to study Anthropology. Preferably at Leiden University, if I'm not mistaken.

That's prestigious—

They have a good Forensic Anthropology department there.

Pretty girls, also—

One of their professors is actually teaching a guest course at Bremersberg University at the moment. Peter Helsing, I believe his name is.

He drives down there once a week. You should ask to speak to him.

I hear it's a very popular course, although I was never that interested.

I rather concern myself with the living.