

Carpe Diem

It was midday, though the sun had already begun to set. Mo felt the rise and fall of her breath as she pushed open the door to English, her second to last class of the day — which had officially peaked last period, when her French teacher announced the highest midterm scores in her class. Her name had been amongst one of those called and she stood unabashedly to the applause of her classmates, confronted once again with a fact that was her delicious secret as she bathed in her own triumphant glow. In the absence of windows and sunlight, one had to make do. Now, she was attuned to the rhythm of the sun, and she could feel her elation tapering off as she settled into her seat.

As soon as she'd placed her belongings down, she spotted an unfamiliar pencil lingering at the edge of the desk. Sophomore English classes all took place in the same classroom, albeit at different times of the day. The pencil probably belonged to someone who'd been here last period, though she wasn't about to track them down and return it to them in what would most certainly not be an amicable interaction. Instead, she added it to her own collection, silently hoping it would never come to be of use. The pen was mightier than the sword; both could be honed to precise, sharp points, and she knew exactly which one she was. To go without a writing utensil at school, though, was an absolute nightmare. You'd be hard-pressed to find anyone willing to lend you one, and if you couldn't complete the assignment on time...

"Shall we resume our discussion on Hobbes and Rousseau?" Mrs. Reems was dependable for her no-nonsense attitude, if nothing else. She surveyed the room impassively, nodding at the sight of her twenty-three students and no notably empty desks. She didn't need to ask them to take out their discussion notes; they just did it, as if it was second nature to them. "Alright. Let's start where we left off. Jason?"

Jason stood, reading from the script in front of him. “Hobbes didn’t really believe that humans were born evil. He thought that we weren’t hard-wired to live in large-scale political societies because of how self-interested we are. Our instinct isn’t to cooperate, it’s—”

“So we’re evil.”

A few laughs from around the room. Mrs. Reems glared at Ty, but motioned for him to continue. “Some of the greatest disasters in human history have been at the hands of tyrannical leaders who leaned into their baser instincts. We act like we’re morally superior to them, but deep down, we’re all the same. So, I think it’s better to acknowledge that we’re evil.”

“So if someone kills another person, it’s somehow justified because it’s how we’re meant to be?” This from Leila. “I think it’s futile to take a stance. If humans are evil, then does that elevate every act of kindness by comparison because of just how impossible it is? And if humans are good, is every act of sin more deserving of condemnation, because it goes against our very nature to be evil?”

“But the point of this discussion is to diagnose the human condition.” William frowned.

“No, idiot, the point of this discussion is to remind you of your morals when you’re moments away from stabbing the little kid down the hall.”

A few gasps. Mo’s eyes instinctively darted to Mrs. Reems, who was straining to identify the source of the voice like most of her classmates. Deferral to authority was ingrained in her personality, but even she had to admit, she was a little bit curious. Her classmates around her waged their own war between curiosity and uneasiness, the sound of internal conflict drowning out that of the masculine voice who’d spoken with righteous indignation and just a hint of amusement.

From the corner of the room, Serena’s serene voice came through:

“It’s a free-for-all for a reason, isn’t it?”

The room burst into conversation. Arguments arose from thin air and people began speaking in hushed voices within their own groups, clearly eager for an out. Mo shifted uncomfortably in her seat. It was terrible, of course, but it was the harsh reality. To go out prepared into the real world, one needed to face its horrors first. They could all decide for themselves when it was over whether they had been good or bad, whether humanity was lost or merely a dying fire, but there would be no resolution today. Or any time in the foreseeable future.

But this had never been discussed inside a classroom before. Academics were treated separately from the unsavory side of student life — here in the classroom, fighting and inflicting physical harm on others would be penalized severely, most likely with expulsion. This felt dangerously close. They were on the precipice of a discovery, one they couldn't come back from. And it would be—

“Watch where you're going!”

Lilah ignored the voice and made a point of walking over to the teacher's desk. “Mrs. Emory, can I go to the nurse's office? I'm not... I'm not feeling well...” As if on cue, her hands began jittering in front of her. When she looked up from her wet, clammy palms, Mrs. Emory shot her a sympathetic gaze that immediately hardened to steel. “Class isn't dismissed yet.”

“But... I...”

“Sorry, dear, I'm afraid I can't hear you.” Mrs. Emory turned her back to the girl, leaving her to walk back to her desk defeated. A few people snickered behind her, boys included.

“I expected a better showing from Ryan Van Buren's sister.”

It was delivered perfectly, with not a hint of remorse. All around her faces contorted with horror like a scene out of a pixelated Halloween movie, and Mo was the camera, torn between capturing the movement of the bodies and limbs before her and the pale white visages that would have you thinking they were all ghosts and this girl was the Queen of Death or whatever tragicomic trope Hallmark movies had you lean into. Except there was no reverence in their gazes — only shock and hatred and a collective scorn that ran deep in their veins.

“You’re Van Buren’s *sister*?” The chair made a noise similar to that of every gear coming to a halt in his head as he removed himself from its dignified, academic shackles. As one the crowd parted for the boy, who moved with swift justice and glared at the girl before lunging for her throat. She gasped. Lilah. Just a girl, scared of whatever havoc was about to come. The movie had come to the point where it had started falling apart at the seams — quite literally.

“You.” Something slammed into the wall, either the boy’s fist or the girl’s skull. “Murdered.” *Slam*.

“My.” Slam. “Sister.”

“I didn’t! I didn’t—”

“You murdered my sister!”

“...Rose?”

It was as good as a confession. The boy took it as an invitation to continue taking out his anger on her, slamming and thrashing and making the occasional frustrated growl. To Lilah’s credit, she never once cried out. Or perhaps she was long gone before she had the chance to.

When he was finished, the girl’s lifeless body lay on the ground. He smiled, satisfied.

“A rose by any other name would smell as sweet. And a Van Buren by any other name can only be a monster.”

“Tough day today?”

“You can’t even imagine.”

Amir looked amused, but he didn’t prod further. “You’re on first watch with Luke.”

Mo nodded. The familiarity of her surroundings brought her comfort: she was back in the engineering room that had served as her second home since she’d started school last year. The robotics club members had many a name for it, but what mattered to her was less the location and more the people. They had taken care of

her. The dog-eat-dog world outside was merciless, and not only had they helped her survive, they had allowed her to thrive — and she had made her own contributions in return, upgrading their security systems and developing an alarm system that had proved itself time and time again. If she kept following in their footsteps, she was certain she would be admitted to a top college and join the network of alumni on the other side; maybe even as class valedictorian.

Or not. Today's events had shaken her to the core. Lilah Van Buren was a good student, selfless, worked hard while managing to fly under the radar. Her only fault, really, was being Ryan's sister. Van Buren had come out of high school the most infamous graduate to ever be a product of their school system; in addition to running his own gang, he allegedly did the Hallsweepers' jobs for them and never received a single punishment for being tardy or turning in an assignment late. While it had never technically been public information who Lilah's blood relations were, word spread quickly when your brother was known better by his code name, Apex, than his real name, Ryan Titus Van Buren. It had only been a matter of time before one of his enemies found out, and this time, she'd simply gotten exceptionally unlucky.

There was a time when Mo didn't concern herself with the luck of others. It was not now. She had been off her rhythm today, some sort of karma for being a bystander in an impossible situation. She'd even answered a question wrong in math when called on, and in that moment of vulnerability, she had felt so... disposable. And if the looks of condemnation from her classmates were any indication, she might as well have been dead already. Her failure was theirs. What was to stop them from pouncing on her, for not being as helpful as she could have been?

But she would go on. She wouldn't let it continue to affect her. It was what Lilah would want.

It was what Lilah would want.

The news that Tyler Bonneau had been detained had spread around school after lunch, and by mid-afternoon, rumors of his expulsion had reached the ear of every student at P.S. 9. Mo had been subjected to

many lengthy interrogations about the events leading up to his outburst and declined to comment each time. Expulsion wasn't justice, but in a way, it was. Without a high school diploma, there was no way one could get a collegiate education and thus any job that didn't involve manual labor. And yet the look in Tyler's eyes as he'd been escorted from the room said that he would make the same choice over and over again if he had to. A life for a life. A heart for a heart.

"Ready to start watch?" Luke. She was grateful to hear his voice, bringing her back to reality.

She nodded. "I'll take the front cameras."

Standing in front of the screen soon became a bore. Mo wasn't in the mood to do work, so after a brief scroll through the updated list of class rankings, she allowed herself to slump at the desk. No sooner had she set her head down did she promptly fall asleep. In her last moment of consciousness, she knew one thing: sleep would not be restful. And nightmares were exactly five desks away.

"Mo! Wake up!"

Her eyelids fluttered open. A male figure stood in her line of sight; he was waving his hands frantically and tapping her on the shoulder. "Hmph."

"You have to see this." He grabbed her arm and pulled her towards the door. She stumbled and yawned as he grabbed the handle and twisted it forward. How long had she been asleep?

"What—"

There was a heart in front of her right foot. A human heart.

And a note attached to it.

The human heart: the most territorial of all things.

*P.S. Are humans good or bad? *wink**

