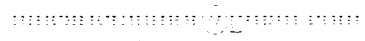


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About 95,000 words



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Tomb House

by H. M. Carter

In the introductory sentence, you introduce a mystery to the audience. Why did this day need a warning sign? It's a rhetorical idea solved for ~~great~~ quickly with the concrete Tomb House.

Chapter 1

On the Struggle Bus

Split to 2 sentences

Let the readers imagine a day from their own lives before plunging into the story!

Some days should come with a warning sign/like the one I imagined posted on Tomb

House's front lawn: "Turn back, creepy house ahead." Or at least they should come with a

heaping basket of soft, cuddly kittens to help you deal with the fallout. I had neither as I

boarded the bus for my first-ever day of school, still rattled by what I'd seen in the bathroom

~~mirror that morning.~~

~~For a second, a girl with my face had stared back at me, but something foreign lived~~

vague

here

↳ could introduce "the girl"

in her eyes. I'd shaken my head, still reeling from the fatigue of yesterday's move, and the

vision had vanished. But I couldn't shake the feeling that the one staring back had been

Aurora, the sister I'd never met and who'd died before I was born. Her photos haunted every

wall of our Victorian family home, hence the pet name Tomb House. We looked so eerily

alike that those pictures could have been of me. Aurora had died at seventeen, exactly the age

am?

I was now something I ~~wasn't~~ very hard not to think about.

↳ Maybe have thoughts be in the present.

The wrinkled bus driver with giant glasses and a jack-o'-lantern grin, growing

split sentences

impatient at my standing paralyzed at the front of the bus/hollered something unintelligible

try too avoid too much "something"

as he pointed a knobby finger to the empty seat behind him. I nodded sheepishly and took the

open seat, happy to have it to myself as we rolled through downtown Sunnyport in upstate

New York. The kid-gorged bus squeezed its long shape down brick-paved streets lined with

↳ Maybe have her spot a sign for Sunnyport, NY

Why is he grinning if impatient?
Ex] Her mystery! Leave some telling. Too much

Love this!

dormant cast iron lampposts and still slumbering antique shops, their old-fashioned charm a stark contrast to what came next.

The bus heaved across the bridge over the Erie Canal and into view of Sunnyport High, its main building a massive glass dome that glowed against the stormy horizon in the background. Smaller, ~~similar~~ ^{breaks flow} mound-like structures extended from all sides like connected hamster pods. Decorative metal spires pointed heavenward from each of the rounded rooftops.

Perfect way to introduce NY setting!

With a loud wheeze, the bus pulled to a stop at the curb. ~~My heart raced as~~ ^{Heart racing,} I took my first step onto the ^{describe} immaculate school grounds. To be starting my senior year after a lifetime of homeschooling, I may as well have disembarked on the moon. ~~Briefly~~, I gaped up at the enormous building, which seemed so much larger up close, ^{how large?} but I soon had to concentrate on not walking into the students in front of me as our chattering throng streamed toward the entrance.

Have students bump into her. Helps ground reader!

A silver plaque by the arched doorway caught my eye as I approached, and I froze in place, the kids behind me muttering and jostling me on all sides as they hurried around. I stared at the familiar tree design with roots twisting into a double helix. Beneath the tree, a fancy font read: "Cultivating Tomorrow's Generations"—the Eden Research Institute's ^{slogan} ~~logo~~.

An institute founded by my grandfather Isaac and where my parents had worked before moving to Colorado so many years ago. I'd seen the design before on Isaac's letterhead, one of the few people I knew who still sent actual mail.

Mom's ~~recent~~ hushed phone conversations suddenly came to mind. Terms like "accelerated curriculum" and "specially equipped" ~~had~~ floated through closed doors. She'd said Sunnyport High ^{is} ~~was~~ the most technologically advanced school in the state. ~~But why~~ ^{Maybe instead,} ~~didn't she tell me about Eden's connection to the school?~~ "If Eden is involved, it's no wonder ~~this~~ ^{this} is an elite school." My stomach dropped. What would the kids think when they learned my last name?

Why should she care about Eden right now?

Maybe instead, "If Eden is involved, it's no wonder ~~this~~ ^{this} is an elite school."

Have her remember familiar home school moments to show what her "normal" is.

Maybe keep Isaac's relationship to Gemi a secret from the readers for now.

Inside the main building, or the Central Mound as I later learned to call it, holographic

projections of people with identical androgynous faces and voices guided students through

the lofty space. One surprised me by addressing me by name and directing me to homeroom.

while another reminded someone not to run. How did a hologram know who I was? News

scrolled across the glass ceiling overhead, turning the dome into an enormous display. This

was worlds away from Dad's whiteboard drawings and hastily assembled molecular bond

demonstrations.

Finding my locker and figuring out how to unlock it with the school's biometric - what's that?

system ate up precious time. I barely made it before the bell by the time I navigated the

winding corridors and located my homeroom—just a brief fifteen-minute administrative

period before regular classes, as explained by my welcome email. Thirty other kids had

already settled into what looked like high-tech recliners with slim computers built into

attached tabletops.

I took a hesitant step inside. At first, curious eyes had lifted to scan the newcomer, but

they quickly shifted from me to the front of the classroom, where a large board pulsed with a

blue glow. Several students exchanged puzzled glances, and one whispered, "Blue? It's never

done that before."

"What is going on with this confounded contraption?" A gray-haired woman with

immaculate pronunciation approached the board. She tapped a panel on the board's side and

the display transitioned to a gentle white. Her blue eyes, accented by blue-rimmed glasses

that perfectly matched her dress, widened when she saw me in the doorway. "You're Isaac's

granddaughter. We've been expecting you." Her tone held a mix of reverence and excitement

one might use when meeting a minor celebrity. Her finely manicured nails touched my arm

with extra care, as if touching fine silk. A light floral scent hung about her.

"Um, yeah," I mumbled with a sudden desire to disappear into the floor.

First impression of school. Extend.

Wouldn't the teachers try to keep her "celebrity" status on the down-low? Or do they just not care?

“Welcome to Sunnyport High, dear. I’m Miss Rainers.” Her berry-glossed lips curved into a genuine smile. She gestured toward an empty seat across the room. “You can sit at that workstation by the window.”

I felt the eyes of every student on me as I followed her to the seat, my self-consciousness on overdrive from the individualized attention. At least the view out the window would help distract me from all the staring.

“Heeeyyy,” a shaggy-haired boy looked ~~from the tech at the front of the room~~ to me once Miss Rainers had returned to her desk. “what was that about? You always make the tech go crazy, or was that just for dramatic effect?”

When I only shrugged, he continued, “I’m Matt. Haven’t seen you before. You new here?”

“Yeah, just moved here.”

“Sweeeet!” His curls shifted higher on his forehead with his smile. “This year is looking up already. If you need anything,” he leaned closer, “just ask. The school can be confusing with all the domes and connecting tubes. It took me *ages* to find the Music Mound the first time. Not all the areas have holographic guides installed yet.”

“Thanks, I’ll... keep that in mind.” I flashed a forced smile, not comfortable with him so close, and still quite embarrassed.

Miss Rainers came back and placed a slim tablet on my desktop. “I almost forgot your student device. There’s a training tutorial pre-loaded that should help you get acclimated to our systems.” She lowered her voice. “Our technology can be a bit overwhelming at first, but unlike me,” she emitted a shrill, nervous laugh and patted her chest, “you’re young and should catch on quickly.”

I thanked her and examined the device. The sleek black surface caught the light as I turned it over in my hands, its edges seamlessly rounded. Only seven or eight inches

Might want to reduce interrupted dialogue on this page to help with smoother flow.

Why was she hired at a tech-savvy school then?

diagonally, and incredibly thin. Perfect for slipping into a backpack pocket while still having

enough screen real estate for schoolwork.

"You turn it on right here," Matt, again in my space, his curls almost falling into his eyes as he leaned forward, pointed to a knob on the side, but he sat back quickly when our teacher began speaking.

"Good morning!" Miss Rainers announced from the front of the room. "We have a

very special young lady joining us. She's just moved here from Colorado. Her generous

family, through the Eden Research Institute, in addition to sponsoring a number of the special

programs we offer here, has donated much of the state-of-the-art technology to our school.

Miss Eden? Would you introduce yourself?"

Oh no. I swallowed past the sudden tightness in my throat and rose to my feet, my

hands trembling slightly. Memories of Dad coaching me through public speaking exercises

flooded back, making my eyes tingle with forming tears. "Hello...y!m Gemi Eden," I managed, my voice smaller than I'd intended. Matt's eyes went wide.

A boy in a black hoodie next to him frowned as he studied my face. His tousled dark hair and angry eyebrows stood out against his ghostly pallor—like he hadn't been outside for months. I sensed a deep sadness in him, or maybe it was merely my own reflecting from him. When he caught me watching, he looked away. My throat tightened further.

"Another Eden in Sunnyport, just what we need," piped a voice from the back of the room.

Miss Rainers stepped in smoothly, casting the offender a warning glance as she placed a comforting hand on my arm. "Thank you, Gemi. We're so pleased to have you with us."

She turned to the class. "Let's make sure Miss Eden feels welcome during this transition."

Something in her tone suggested she knew more about my situation than she was letting on,

Normally, teachers cannot touch students like that.

I tend to associate elite schools with uniforms and dress codes.

Why notice him and not the other students? Emphasize why his reaction is different.

Too many comments!

though I couldn't imagine how. Mom must have said something during the enrollment process.

I sank back into my seat, grateful to be out of the spotlight. The tingle in my eyes subsided as I took a deep breath.

"Now," Miss Rainers continued with renewed energy, "since this is Gemi's first day, why don't we go around and introduce ourselves? Let's start with you, Jess." *Why start with him?*

The boy in the hoodie flinched, then rose with obvious reluctance. "Jess Blakely," he muttered to his desk before sinking back down.

One by one, the others stood and gave their names. Most seemed annoyed as they studied my face. Some even averted their eyes when our gazes met. All because of my name? The frosty reception seemed an extreme reaction to some donated funding and technology by my grandfather. Weren't those good things?

*Why is she surprised?
Gemi anticipated this.
Or it seemed like she did.*

The bell startled me from my thoughts. Our brief homeroom period ~~had~~ ended. I gathered my things to leave when Matt asked in a hushed voice, "You're an Eden?"

"So my birth certificate says," I replied with a shrug and a smile that said "what-can-I-do?"

Matt's face paled. "Wooaahh, didn't know." His previously friendly face elongated with disbelief before he grabbed his things and scrambled toward the door.

Shocked, I stared after him, my mouth hanging open, when Miss Rainers came toward me, tapping a tablet in her hands. "There, I've activated your dining access in the system. You're all set for lunch. The cashiers will be happy to assist if you need help. Don't hesitate to ask."

"Oh, um, thanks." I nodded.

"Do you know where you're going?" Her eyes studied me with concern.

"Calc two with Mr. Summers, North Mound, room one twelve," I repeated from

memory. "I think I can find it."

She smiled. "You'll do fine, dear, but if you have any trouble, the holographic guides

will help you. We're happy to have you with us, Geml."

Unsure of what else to say, I cast her a weak smile and hurried out the door, my

stomach twisting in a ball of knots. In the hallway, a flash of lightning illuminated the glass

corridors, followed seconds later by a low rumble of thunder. The storm that had been

threatening all morning was finally breaking.

With frequent help from the holographic guides, I made my way to the North Mound,

the Central Mound's baby twin. Fat raindrops grew into sheets of water on the connecting

glass corridor. By the time I reached the smaller dome, the storm roared overhead. Briefly, I

imagined myself at the base of a waterfall, much like the one near our Colorado home—a

place now as distant and unreachable as my life before Dad's illness.

Breathe, you've got this.

I took several slow, calming breaths, then entered Mr. Summers' math class. The

room was unlike any I'd seen yet. Holographic displays hovered above each desk, some

showing student profiles or customized welcome screens as students logged in with their

tablets. A few early arrivals had already pulled up notes or homework from previous classes.

Around me, interactive wall boards like the one in homeroom shifted slowly between

varying shades of pink, green, and blue, creating the impression of a living space and

seeming to prefer blue whenever I drew near. ~~Odd. Was the tech responding to me?~~

A man in his early to mid-thirties stood at the front, Mr. Summers I presumed,

manipulating a floating array of numbers and symbols above his palms with graceful hand

gestures. His body stilled when he turned to greet me. Recognition, then shock, flickered

across his face.

Par 1. Mr. Summers Before Seeing her

Par 2. Rapid shock after! Think snappy!

Let the audience ask that themselves

The holographic display above his hands shimmered and vanished. He fumbled with a slim control panel on his wrist, his movements becoming erratic. I stepped forward, uncertain, as his face drained of color.

"Aurora?" he whispered, so quiet I almost didn't hear it.

"I... I'm Gemini Eden," I stammered, using my full name instead of my nickname in my confusion. "It's my first day."

He stumbled back, shaking his head slightly as if trying to clear it. "Yes, of course.

Isaac mentioned..." His voice faded as he continued to stare, his green eyes wide and unfocused. "I just didn't expect..."

The seconds ticked away on a digital wall display, the only sound in the room.

Finally, he took in a deep, ragged breath. "I apologize. I need a moment. It seems I'm not feeling well." He glanced at the teaching assistant, who had been working quietly in the corner. "Ms. Chen? Take over, please."

Without another word, he hurried from the room.

As I stood there, confused and embarrassed, the full weight of my situation crashed over me. A few days ago, I was in Colorado, surrounded by familiar mountains in a place that made sense. Now, I was in some bizarre, high-tech school where a teacher had just called me by my dead sister's name. I glanced around at my classmates' curious faces, feeling more alone than ever. Why had he called me Aurora? And how did he know her? First the pictures at Tomb House, then seeing her in the bathroom mirror that morning, and now this. I couldn't seem to escape her.

Amidst the pelting rain above and the students whispering around me, I took a deep breath. Only second period, and already I wanted to bolt for the exit. But as disorienting as this new world seemed, I'd already survived the worst day of my life when we lost Dad. Nothing else could ever top that. Whatever Sunnysport High, Tomb House, and Aurora had in

Wouldn't he
have a
title?
Dr.?
Mr.?

Combine to
just 1
question.

store for me, I would meet head-on. Aurora may have shared my face, but our similarities

stopped there. Cause there was one thing I knew for sure: I was not my sister.

- First chapter has all necessities. More details and/or change in ^{event} sequence ~~will~~ will improve engagement overall. I'd like to see this school become something far from what we could ever see in reality to emphasize the elite difference between this school and the mundane. Compare + contrast more. Highlight difference! Incorporate more Gem's past expectations for school and how they are shattered.
- Gem feels very robotic despite her anxiety. That's Really learn into ~~that~~ those first-day jitters. how readers gain empathy. Empathy = investment.
- Really great dialogue! Love reading about the architecture!