

## **A TEMPORARY EXPERIENCE**

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The piercing sound of the fire alarm drummed the aisles of the school. White lights flashed on and off, illuminating the questioning faces of everybody. The beat of their footsteps marched through the various designated exits. Disquieted whispers bounced through each group of teenager students. Many were already speculating the possible reasons as to why they were evacuating the building, while teachers hawked around their heads making sure that no one was left behind. Once outside, in the clear afternoon sky, the recounting of the kids began. One by one, every unique name had been called and the ups and downs of hands confirmed that everyone was there. Safe and sound they all appeared to be. Distant sirens of fire trucks, police cars, and emergency vehicles relaxed the adult shoulders, but, once again, they were up after noticing that reporters were also entering the scene. For several days, the incident was broadcasted as the top story, and it got front page in their local newspaper. Everyone wanted to know about the false alarm that happened in the high school; too bad nobody knew why and how it occurred. Except him.

The adult rooster crowed his third song of the day. The rays of the tropical sun surpassed his blackout curtains, waking him up from a deep sleep. He rolled over trying to escape the intense glares, but the first beep of his alarm clock informed him that it was time to get out of bed. In autopilot, he dressed with the worn-out jeans he found on the messy tile floor and a clean emerald t-shirt. His Nike black sneakers steered him into the rich aroma of the homemade coffee and the freshly made pancakes along with the greasy bacon.

“Have you done it yet?” His mom impatiently asked. She was tired of initiating the same conversation.

“Not yet,” he drowsily responded, once his lips touched the hot ceramic mug.

“You know, the deadline is almost over,” she irritably stated, while placing the delicious plate of food to his little sister.

“I don’t know why you haven’t done it.” “I already know where I wanna go,” little Miss Perfect mentioned.

“Because I’m still deciding,” he defensively expressed.

“On what?” His mama irascibly questioned.

“Everything.”

The tall, leafy, green trees rapidly passed, and concrete houses came into view. Each one painted with a beige shade, crimson French tiles fixed on every roof, and different styles of doors secured each front entry. The local postal office, the only supermarket, the outdated public library began to appear next, along with the bank, the Christian church, the antique store, and the diner. The heated sun warmed his right cheek, as he profoundly studied the cloudless sky. The deep voice of his best friend made him turn from the bus window, just when Fred was starting to sit in the empty chair. His friendly hazel eyes contrasted the ginger of his head, and the abundant freckles decorated his long nose and the shallow cheeks that were dusted with barely there facial hair. Fred was the one who argued about the extinction of dinosaurs. He said that aliens came into Earth; and with their big machine guns, destroyed the ancient species. Fred was so set in his theory that their first-grade teacher could not change his mind. Mock laughter erupted after his claim, but his composure never crumbled. From that moment on, he knew that that kid was going to be one of the special people in his life.

“I just sent my last application!” Fred proudly pronounced.

“Although, I must say that having our next four years decided by a chubby old man is just so not cool. I mean, he only ever sees our grades, our GPA, and if we ever bothered to do extracurricular activities,” he began to ramble.

“How the hell will he know about our likes and dislikes, about how a loving son, hard worker, and a nice man I am? About the fact that I’m going to be the first Smith to go to college. I just don’t understand how our lives are being reduced in numbers.

“Isn’t university the universal center of knowledge? Where people with different minds converge and each learn from one another? By saying yes to a few and no to the others, they are deceiving the actual purpose of going to college, and I

bet my right leg that they are doing it because they want people who think just like them,” Fred passionately remarked.

“And don’t get me started on the cost of the tuition. They are purposely slaving the students with debts. Some have to work extra hours, so classes can be paid, but not hard enough to receive the money needed to fill their stomachs with food.

“I believe that university should be open to anyone who has the desire to learn. Money should not be an impediment to achieve that, and even less the yes and no of this chubby man who probably paid his way there.”

“Then why did you apply to five universities? If you knew how monopolized, they are?” He interrupted Fred’s argument.

“Because I want to be someone in this world. I want to have a job that pays well. That it can provide me with the stability and the secure lifestyle that I desire. I can’t accomplish all the dreams that I have if I don’t go to college.” Fred frankly stated.

The school bus slowed down and in a matter of seconds, they were parked in the designated stop. Thanks, and Have a nice day were given to the driver. The fresh cut grass, the blooming flowers, and the scent of rain reminded him that spring had begun. The pathway to the main doors of the local high school was adorned by the logo of the school. The rounded image of a big house with a stick figure of a kid waving hello had represented the school for over seventy-one years. The fact that it was actually a house back in the day solidified the meaning of a school being the second home for the younger generation. Inside those cream walls, lasting friendships began to form, heartbreaks, and passion never ceased to occur; the period when innocent minds matures into critical thinkers, the moment when patience is put to test after having to work in group projects, the time when you learned how not to faint or get sick when you are giving an oral presentation, the years when peer pressure dictates the life of those who knows better, and the rise of who I wanted to be when I get older, also occurred there. Some teachers capture the heart and trust of the students. They become the support system most students need. They teach with their heart and soul and enamored the students even in the most boring classes. They inspired the students to the point of some imagining themselves becoming teachers, or others guided into the path they were too afraid to consider. Most of the teachers were the key piece for making the high school an eminent site in their small town. Every year 1,460 students walk the isles of the high school where some teachers had helped change the life of one or of many of these students.

Various chattering sounds were heard once he opened his steel large locker. His combination was a date he would never forget. He and his dad had been camping on the beach. They ate hot dogs for dinner; he drank his first legal beer, then a second and a third. He witnessed the most beautiful sunset he had ever seen; the red orange hues combined with the pink and violet blue made the scenery a magical one. The salty air and the soothing waves gave him the confidence to divulge his deep desires.

“I want to be a sculptor,” blushing after his confession.

He centered his attention on the up and down motion of the waves. The soft but secured tone made him turn toward his father.

“Son, as a man living his last days on this earth, I want you to know that life is a temporary experience. Each day you wake up is a day deducted in the ones that you have left. Therefore, in order to fully appreciate them, you have to do the things that make you blissfully happy. And if that means being a sculptor, then so be it.”

“But I won’t be rich. I won’t have the sport car or the big mansion that I pictured. I won’t be able to compete with my friends, once we’re older, since I won’t have the luxuries we all said we would have.”

“Son, I can’t say that money is unimportant. Yes, it can open a lot of closed doors you thought you would never see. It would make your life ten times easier, since it can prevent obstacles from obstructing your journey. But, at the same time, I want you to always remember that no matter how much *dinero* you have, it can never buy you the happiness you deserve. Once you’re dead, you leave behind every material thing you acquired throughout the course of your existing life, but the joyful laughter, the gleeful encounters with family or friends, and the serene satisfaction of knowing that you are laboring on something that you love are the things that would accompany the departing soul.”

“Yo, man. Are you ready for the test?” Fred’s pitched voice interrupted the mental image of the last day he bonded with his dad. A week after the camping trip, his dad took his last breath. Eight months had passed, and for him time had stopped.

“Dude! Are you with me?” Fred asked.

“No, sorry man. What did you say?”

“That if you studied for the test?”

“What test?” He said with a surprised tone.

“The comprehension test on *The Scarlet Letter*.”

“Oh shit! I thought it was due on the 12th.”

“Well, today is the 12th, buddy,” Fred informed him.

He became alarmed after discovering his mistake. He couldn't afford to get another low grade. His chance of graduating depended on him passing this class.

“Well, hello big brother.” His only sister said, just when she joined them.

“What are you doing here, Sarah? You know freshmen's lockers are located on the other side of the school.” He annoyingly responded.

“Well, for your information, Mom wanted me to remind you that today she is working a double shift at the hospital. So, you are stuck with me. Thank God Mom left dinner ready, so all you have to do is heat the food. Think you can handle that?”

“Go to hell, Sarah!”

“Aaawww, why are you in a sour mood? Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed?”

“He forgot that today we have a major exam,” Fred announced.

“Well, you know you can't flunk again. That would lower your GPA even more,” little-miss-know-it-all expressed.

“Since when did you start caring for the GPA?” Fred asked.

“Since I decided that I want to apply for an Ivy League School. You know that Harvard only accepts like 5% of the 39, 0000 students who try to apply there. In Columbia, you must have an average of at least 4.16, and the fact that I want to become a doctor or a lawyer, I haven't decided yet.”

“Woman! You are so having a heart attack, and it's going to be before they give you your diploma,” Fred remarked.

“Fred, shut up. I know what I'm doing. I have it all planned out. I will study, study, and study.”

“So, no social life.”

“Well, for your information, everyone knows that life starts after college,” Sarah said in an obvious tone.

The loud ringing of the school bell concluded their conversation. First period was up, and he and Fred needed to go to Spanish class. The only class he could proudly say that he loved. For him, speaking Spanish was much more than communicating with others. It was culture and traditions all rolled into one. It was dancing salsa or relishing the songs of Fiel a la Vega. Spanish was the ticket to explore all the wonderful countries his father had mentioned. It was everything that he ever desired, and he knew that it was his way of honoring his father and grandparents. Because for him, it represented everything, and he was never going to forget it.

Sixth period had come to an end. He was now passing through the AP classrooms, the bathrooms, a fire alarm, and the main library. He left the textbooks he used in his prior classes in his locker and was on his way to the cafeteria. Once inside, the jumble of teenage voices greeted him. It was the time where you could only see ninth graders eating with twelve graders. Eleventh and tenth graders were the exception since they always preferred to eat within their own circle. He never understood why each student had this inner rule where he or she could solely interact with the ones who were in the same grade as them. It felt like it was their own way to preserve their status. Tenth graders looked down on ninth graders since they already had passed that grade, and so they thought themselves superior. Eleventh graders worshipped the grounds of the twelve graders since they were actually the kings and queens of the school. He bet that eleventh graders had countdowns on how much time they had left to actually rule the school. They had their own hierarchy and he could not remember how it started.

He was holding his lunch plate when he spotted his usual table. Fred and Sarah were already there. He felt bad after the way he treated his little sister earlier. He was angry with himself for forgetting the date of the exam, but he shouldn't have taken his frustration out on her. He knew that Sarah was still grieving the death of their father. Her obsession with studying was her way of coping with the pain. He understood that since he used his lack of caring attitude to manage his own. He just lost his sense of motivation. Not even sculpting brought a smile to his face. He had promised his father he would never leave it, but he felt that a part of him had died too.

“Dude, you are late. Sarah is already helping me study.”

“Ok, when *The Scarlet Letter* was originally published,” Sarah said after reading Fred’s notes.

“Uhm... 1850,” Fred answered.

“Correct. Ok, next question. *The Scarlet Letter* is a comedy, suspense, or a romance novel?”

“Obviously, romance.”

“Perfect.”

“Wait, are you telling me that those are actually the questions the teacher expects us to know?” He perplexedly questioned.

“Yeah, dude. She said that the exam was going to consist in three parts and those are true or false, matching, and choosing the right answer.

“And I have this theory that if you choose C in the ones that you don’t know in the part of choosing the right answer, you would have an 85% chance that it would be correct. So, remember, always choose C,” Fred confidently mentioned.

“But what about Dimmesdale’s supposed repentance? The part where Hawthorne is probably stating that males are the true sinners in our society. Dimmesdale purposely lied and publicly shamed Hester Prynne. And worst of all, he did it in front of all his followers. He was praising that sinners would be shamed and banned forever, when in fact he was actually Pearl’s father! He was a liar and a manipulator!” He said with a secure tone.

“Dude! What the hell are you talking about? I don’t have anything remotely similar on what you just babbled,” Fred uttered while he was reading his notes.

“Didn’t you study? Anything?” His little sister concernedly asked.

“Apparently not,” he said rolling his eyes.

The school bell rang once, announcing that lunch had ended and that students needed to go to their last class. Walking to his literature class, he kept thinking about the exam. He knew that he should have paid more attention to that class, but he had read that book. He couldn’t believe that his understanding in the novel was going to be tested in a what-is-going-to-be-best-answer scenario. He also hated filling out those bubbles in the Scantron. He almost received a bad grade when he accidentally skipped a number and unfortunately the subsequent numbers were all wrong. Thank

God, the teacher saw the error and decided to correct his actual exam. He was just not a fan of those types of tests. He noticed that memorization was the best friend of a student.

He was half listening to what Fred was saying when he heard someone calling his name. It was his art teacher. He remembered the time when he was heading to his locker, after the classes had ended, and found his art teacher molding what he thought looked like a wolf. The large clay figure was just magical. It was mysterious, commanding, lethal, but beautiful at the same time. He was so in awe at what he was seeing that he did not notice his teacher approaching him. His embarrassment faded quickly when he heard that the teacher was informing him about the new art club he was conducting. He went to the first meeting, and the second, and the third. That was three years ago.

“Hello, Mr. Rivera,” he said.

“Have you put into thought what I told you earlier?”

“A little, but I haven’t actually made a decision,” he expressed.

“Well, you better decide soon. I can’t hold that spot much longer, and I know you are the best candidate for that,” the art teacher proclaimed.

“Ok, ok, I will tell you tomorrow what I decide, promise.”

With a nod of the head the art teacher left, and he and Fred entered the Literature class. By the time they entered the classroom, the tests and Scantron were already placed on each desk and students were seated and waiting for the following instructions.

He sat on his usual desk and Fred sat behind him. He was taking out his pencil and eraser when he heard the teacher say a few words, and then declared that they were ready to begin.

He flipped the exam and he felt a headache rising on the right side of his head. Fred was totally right. Those were the questions the teacher had posted. He couldn’t believe it. He looked around the room and tried to get a feel on the other students. A girl already was passing to the second page. She probably had *The Scarlet Letter* under her pillow. There was a guy who was having a pantomime session with the guy beside him. They most have practiced before entering the classroom, and they knew what sign belonged to the letter A. Another guy was actually sleeping. He had to look twice to make sure he was not imagining it. He either raced through the test



or he just didn't care. Then, he saw another student who was in fact crying. The face was starting to get red and swollen. He thought that the kid had the look that expressed my-life-is-officially-over. It was in that moment, when he rose from his chair and just left the classroom.

He searched the empty halls and without thinking, he stopped in front of the large enclosed bulletin board. Inside, there were seventy-one photos of all the senior classes that had graduated there. Automatically, he spotted his father. The goofy grin that always decorated his face was there. Even in the rough moments of chemo, his grin never left. From a tender age, his father understood how precious life was, and that living involved also the reality of taking chances. That it did not matter if you fail during the process of it because the important fact was that at least you tried.

With that in mind, he spotted a fire alarm right next to it. Maybe it was an outer experience or a moment of insanity, but he pulled down the handle. White lights began to appear. They were flashing in a rhythmic way. The intense sound of it bounced through each wall of the school. People were starting to leave the building, and he was just observing. Fred appeared out of nowhere and grabbed his emerald t-shirt. He guided him outside and they joined their group. Different sirens were heard, and teachers had already recounted the students. Everyone was taken aback by what just happened, but he was just observing.

“Dude, are you ok?” Fred asked with a bewildered expression.

He only grinned at his question and added a mental note that said yes to Mr. Rivera's proposal. He was ready to take that chance.