

Smart!

## **2nd grade**

I stare outside, head resting against the window. The world looks so funny while riding in a car. Everything feels so slow, like a movie. Today the sky is a very boring color, but it makes the pine trees glow like emeralds. I'm bored so I hum the song we learned in music class. It had such a funny video, like....

"Shh!" Mom hisses.

I stop and frown, and I think Mom notices because she then cheerily asks, "How was school?"

"Fine," I say plainly.

"Just fine?"

My face lights up, "I mean, in science class we made slime and I got it all stuck on the table. But it was okay because-"

"Sorry Alaya, give me one second."

Mom pulls out her phone and answers the call. I wish I was as important as the phone. Maybe if I make Mom proud today, I will be.

We drive up a hill and Mom parks in front of some khaki colored building. She gets out of the car and opens my door. I jump out of my seat and hold her hand as we both walk towards the front door. I look up and see the words "Pine Tree Assessment Center" plastered in big bold letters.

We enter and see a lady sitting at the front desk. This building feels like a jail. It's all dull with cream colored walls. The front desk is another boring brown color and next to the desk there is an opening to a hallway. The front desk lady smiles as Mom lists our names on some clipboard.

From the hallway, another lady approaches us, “Are you Alaya!” she exclaims.

Startled, I try to hide behind Mom but she grips my shoulders and pushes me forwards.

“Say hi,” she commands through a gaudy smile.

I wave awkwardly and the lady smiles.

“I’m Jemma,” she says. “I’ll be your proctor, okay.”

“Okay,” I whisper and she leads us through a corridor into another dull room. Room 135, spelling ACE. Maybe this means I’ll ace this test.

I sit down on a cushiony chair and Mom kisses my cheek, “Good luck,” she says into my ear, before leaving.

Jemma pulls out a paper from the drawer behind her, and places it in front of me. On the top it says, “Cognitive Abilities Test.”

“This shouldn’t take too long, especially for a kid like you.”

“Okay,” I mutter and she hands me a pencil.

“Start whenever you’re ready.”

I grab the pencil and write my name on the top.

Here goes nothing...

#### **4th Grade**

“Open your textbooks to page one hundred-thirty!”

I pull out the book and flip through the pages until the number '130' pops up on the bottom right corner.

"Look!" the girl next to me cries, and points to the photo on the page. Over the past few months we have been learning about stars, but this doesn't look like a star at all. More like a big black dot.

"Quiet down class!" my teacher hollers, and pulls up the same photo on the smartboard.

"This," her cursor glides over the image, "is a black hole. Do any of you know what a black hole is?"

A boy raises his hand, "It's what happens when a star dies!"

"Precisely," she zooms in more. "Once a star dies, it turns into this. And if you get too close, you'll get sucked inside!"

She spookily waves her arms like a psychic unraveling our future.

"Whats inside a black hole?" I ask.

"Nobody knows, but whatever goes inside never comes out."

"So it...kills you?"

"As we know of, yes."

Chills fall down my spine and I stumble, "B-But isn't the sun a star?"

"It is."

"So won't we all get sucked in?"

"Yes, but we won't be alive when that happens."

I bite my lip, "Oh."

The bell rings and students slam their books shut and scurry over to the door.

“We’ll pick this up after recess,” my teacher announces, and walks over to unlock the door. Kids storm outside racing to get the first basketball or tetherball. But I don’t. I walk slowly with calculated steps. The floor feels weird now, like I’m sinking into a mattress. Time feels slower. Time will soon stop...

I trudge down the staircase until my shoes meet the pavement. Scanning the view around, it all seems too good to be true. Kids are laughing and playing and smiling. As if they have no care in the world. Nothing to fear.

These kids are fools.

They don’t know the truth. The fact that everything around us will soon be destroyed. Even the brightest things like stars will be sucked up by some devil. My mom, dad, friends, teachers, every single person dead. Oblivion. That’s what will happen to us all once this happens. Once we die.

What happens after we die?

Do we go somewhere? Probably not. But how? How can my whole life just end? How can this beautiful world be annihilated? Mom says to pray but is there really anyone to pray to? Why is it that nobody cares? Why does everyone live so comfortably when we are just fated for nothing-ness? What's the point of life if I’m living to die?

Why am I here?

And do I really deserve to stay?

“Are you okay?” says a soft voice behind me and I snap back into reality. A recess teacher looks down at me with pity, eyes wide. It’s like the whole world is spinning. Everyone is drowning in this illusion of happiness. Happiness. Ice cream is happiness. My friends are happiness. But life isn’t happiness.

Life is a lie.

“Are sure you’re okay?” she repeats, but I ignore her. Thoughts ring through my head, terrorizing me by the second.

“Hello?”

*Hello.*

She shakes my shoulder, “Are you sure you are okay?”

*Am I okay?*

“Do I need to call someone?”

*Call him.*

“Huh?”

*Call death.*

Another voice, “Alaya!”

*Alaya can't pick up.*

And it all turns black...

### **7th grade**

“What did you get on the test?”

“A hundred,” I drawl.

“How! You’re so smart!”

I snicker, “Thanks.”

Smart. The word I’ve been hearing my entire life but have never believed. The label which is supposed to bring every bit of joy but just leaves you alone. Hollow. Empty. People only talk to you for answers on some dumb test and then forget the next week that you exist. And then cover it up by calling you ‘smart’.

Smart is pain.

The world is not built for those who are smart. For those who absorb every inch. Whose minds constantly circuit over the tiny dark details and ignore the rest. We are told we are crazy. That we should smile a bit more and we shouldn't worry. Worst of all, we get praised. Put on some dirty pedestal. As if this brain of mine is helping me in any way other than fulfilling my parents dreams.

Parents. I forgot about those two. The people who destroyed me and then think cold silence will fix it all. The same people who rave about how superior I am as the other parents gape in awe. Then they all ask their kids "Why can't you be more like them?". It's because those kids aren't broken. But once a parent says that, it stings. No, it rips you apart.

These days, I don't talk a lot. I used to read more but nowadays I come across a few words that make me just want to disappear. My parents tell me to forget all of this and focus on my studies. All just a bunch of lies. They tell you to think but only good thoughts. My thoughts aren't like that, they are the type which haunt you in the middle of the night.

Today I have a birthday party that I don't want to go to. But if I don't go, my Mom will ask me why I'm so socially awkward.

And now the only thing I can do is just fake some more smiles and hope that one day it becomes better...

### **8th grade**

I've become the type of person I've hated.

I remember once I used to envy those who could just take life easily. I thought I was so different, constantly zoning out into a world of my own. I'd look around and see everyone rabidly engaging in conversation, giggling and cheering. I thought that not caring about

superficial things was a strength but it tormented me. Constantly left me choking in a sea of philosophical ideology. "It's not that deep," people say, but to me everything is deep. This world in my head blocked everything out, left me alone in peace.

But alone then turned to loneliness.

The same people who I'd look around and gawk at I then idolized. I wondered how people could be so present. How they didn't have a constant need to just drift off.

And I soon figured out that I was wrong..

Everyone around me is smart. I met people, people just like me. People whose parents constantly see the worst in them. The people who were just never good enough even though they tried harder than everyone else. People who cared about nothing and everything at the same time.

People who I love.

Friends, we call them. Companions on this wild journey of life. They may look cheerful and funny, like nothing affects them. That's why we need them because it puts us in a place where we think that being like that is possible. But it's not.

Throughout the year I've been healed. I am still sad. I still cry. But now I know that I'm not an alien. That the world which I thought everyone else belonged to nobody has ever belonged in. Behind those who seem like they have it all is someone who feels they have nothing. In reality, we have all been indoctrinated to be clones of each other, endlessly craving validation from words like 'smart', 'pretty', and 'nice'. But once you achieve these things, you realize that during the search for these superficial ideologies, you have been conned. And it's easy for this to happen.

But humans aren't easy.

That's what makes us special.

