

## **Gold Key:**

### *Staying Strong*

9:30 pm 2001.12.19

Footsteps begin to echo in the corridor outside the classroom. The big basketball game is over and the gym is emptying. The science club decides to end their meeting before the parking lot gets jammed. Nia cleans her work station, packs her bag, adjusts her hijab, and leaves.

9:40pm 2001.12.19

A lamppost flickers eerily on the pavement, looming over Nia as she exits the school. The bulb in the middle has long been shattered. She steps over broken glass and cigarettes. At the far end of the school grounds she spins around suddenly; she doesn't know exactly why. Perhaps she feels eyes on her. The hairs on the nape of her neck bristle. She breathes heavily. Her heart races and her lungs shallowly rise and fall.

9:59 pm 2001.12.19

Nia takes a look down the alleyway, a shortcut home. Her dark skin glows under the blue-tinted streetlights. She makes her way between the damp buildings. The houses have cement walls that seem to wobble as she walks. Dead vines crawl up window sills and crumbling ash envelopes stacks of grey brick. The dark alley cuts twenty minutes from her walk home.

10:01pm 2001.12.19

Long shadows appear on the wet ground. Snickers and deep male voices echo from somewhere behind. The air is suddenly full of the sound of breaking glass. Nia jumps back. Fragments fly viciously then settle in the dark, damp alley. Nia feels a tug on her hijab. The wind bites her ears.

“Stop! Please stop!”

Nia cries in horror, clinging onto her the silk of her head covering, fists clenched, frightened. Adrenaline floods her nerves. Her heart races and her eyes are wide with fear. She sees things...sees him... sees them... They are behind her. Five meters, four meters, three meters, closer and closer. Her breath comes in small spurts, hot and nervous. Her sweaty fists swing forward, as if they might make everything disappear. She hears glass breaking and more laughter. Mud smears her face and uncovered hair.

“Please Allah, let me live.” she cries aloud, grasping for what remains of her torn hijab. She throws herself forward, towards the end of the alley. Her lungs and heart are pumping, but the air doesn't seem to be enough as she sprints forward, panic in her exhausted limbs.

10:21pm 2001.12.19

Nia's hands tremble as she reaches the metal doorknob of her third-floor apartment. Nia walks in, putting the pieces of her hijab on the counter, and hangs her backpack on a hook. Her heart is finally relaxed. She recalls that her father is working the late shift at the gas station and will be back from home late. She returns to lock the door and finds it ajar.

There, in the hall are the three tall creatures; male peers; violent bullies; assailants. Her heart stops beating. Her knees lock. Her face slackens. No expression; no words. She just stands there, mortified. She doesn't want to believe her eyes. It is not true.

She screams at the top of her lungs, but the building is depressed and indifferent and the police don't like to come by here anyway. The sounds of violent struggle—crashing, thumping, and shattering—can be heard from the hall.

10:23pm 2001.12.19

The alley behind the apartment complex is silent and dark. Suddenly, there is the explosive sound of shattering glass. Then, a terrible thump.

9:00 am 2001.12.20

“Good morning, my name is Audrey Dickenson and welcome to Eyes on Texas News. In tragic local news, 16-year-old high school student Nia Abad was found dead this morning in an alley behind her apartment building in Lubbock after falling from a balcony above. While police originally believed the death to be suicide, signs of struggle inside the home have led to the opening a homicide investigation. We join correspondent Walter Morgan at the scene...”

2001.08.17

Dear Diary,

It's your favorite world adventurer! I am slowly adjusting to this new home. Texas feels hot and empty. I miss mom's muufo. Dad tried to cook it and nearly burned our apartment down.

School starts today. Mom called from Mogadishu last night and told me to stay strong until she arrives. I promised her I would.

-Nia A

**Honorable Mention:**

*Burnt Honey*

You may call Covid the Chinese virus,  
Wrapping yourselves in red white and blue  
You may look upon us, yellow peril back to boil,  
If only the Pacific border were too wide to swim across.

Did our unclean and untailed outfits upset your eyes?  
Or did our coarse hands from work on your railroads  
doom our immigration applications?  
Have you been laughing the whole time?

How well do you see our faces?  
Or do you only see shades of yellow?

We want our clothes to be clean in your eyes  
Now that our hands are covered with gold  
We want to be seen as harmless, putting honey in your beehive,  
But we are stung by bees.

We admit life is better,  
But to what degree?  
My parents insist it is an “honor to be Asian”  
But I fear they celebrate the “honor” of  
Not being Black in a white man’s country.

The thing about honey  
Though it is sweet and flowing,  
When heated  
It doesn’t boil—it burns.