

Zachary Cheng and Ava Vaeth's

Landlocked

<Amber>

I held my breath as the seconds ticked down to midnight and the cool air flowed over my face.

56. 57. 58. 59.

“Midnight,” I whispered to myself.

I quietly got up from my bed and tip-toed to my room's opening to the world. I pushed my face toward my room window and waited for something magnificent to happen.

All the lights of the city extinguished as one and I saw shining little white dots appear, twinkling all over the sky. I smiled to myself and whispered, “It's beautiful.”

I crept down the stairs in time to witness another episode of my parents debating how best to handle the newest tax raise from the government. My mom continued to murmur to my dad about getting a pay raise or quitting to get a better-paying job.

The TV blared in the background about how the pandemic was getting worse. The shadows flickered eerily onto my parents as the screen described the endless spooky wave of death engulfing our city.

I sighed to myself quietly. *I should get to sleep, Ash might find out and complain to Mom.* I sauntered back to my bedroom to take one last peek at the stars that always watch over this world before I went to bed.

“C'mere, Vivian,” I whispered to beckon my cat to sleep with me. Vivian meowed and followed me to my bed, where we both fell asleep as quickly as the lights of our room flickered out.

I woke up the next morning at six in the morning and started to prepare myself for another day of stress.

“Good morning, Mom and Dad!” I said, stifling a yawn.

“Good morning, Amber!” responded my parents.

“Hey, what about me?” chuckled Ash, my annoying older brother, from the living room sofa.

“Good morning to you too, Ash,” I answered without thinking.

“Good morning, Amber! Hope you slept well!” he replied. “Did you know that the planet has gotten, like, three degrees hotter on average since last century!”

“We need to do something! Make them pass a law or something!” I yelled.

“Amber, always so shouty and quick to do things,” my mom admonished.

I sauntered towards the dinner table and took in the morning surroundings. The sound of the reporter echoed from the TV, eggs shimmered on the pan on the stovetop, coffee splashed into my dad’s mug, and Vivian snuggled against my brother’s leg.

As I sat down at the dining table, the TV suddenly turned on and blared out a few notes to command our family’s attention.

A news flash! Probably the same stuff again about deaths and ‘don’t do this and that otherwise you might die too’, I tell myself haughtily, rolling my eyes. I continued my breakfast wordlessly, crossing my fingers for what I knew wouldn’t be the case.

I repeated the same mantra I’d been repeating since the beginning. *Tell us we can go back to before. Tell us we can be normal again. Tell us this is just a dream.*

I snapped back to reality to listen to the news flash describe the new pay rise for basic living essentials, masks, and vaccines. The boards below our feet creaked, sympathizing with the

collective groans issued from our family's mouths. Mom began to panic but she smiled and began to say, "Good thing I bought 20 packs of masks! Still can't get the vaccine, though."

"For a good reason," Dad retaliated. "We all promised we wouldn't take the vaccine because it was *much* too expensive."

"But Dad, all my online friends got it," Ash complained with a sad look on his face. "Why can't at least *one* of us get the shot?" Silence passed between my family and we all went back to doing what we were doing before.

I picked up a bowl of the "fresh" cereal delivered yesterday from the cabinet to eat and plopped down next to the table to eat in silence and think about nothing.

After I finished my breakfast, my cat Vivian followed me as I padded up the stairs to my room and started up my computer alone in silence. My door swung shut behind me.

It's funny, I thought to myself, ever since two years ago, life has had no separation. But even though the world is trapped at home, I still can't get away from myself.

I glanced at the calendar, reminding me I have today off. That meant I got to relax and play games, so I checked my text messages, scanned them, and opened up Roblox. As if nothing had happened, my morning flew by, absorbed in my games.

<Josh>

I hopped over to my desk to log on to my computer for the third time that day just in time to see a wave of new messages piled in about the upcoming holiday and the new pandemic restrictions associated with it.

Rising death toll, the message proclaimed, stay inside.

How does the government even see who dies if all people do is stay indoors all the time anyway? I wondered as I started to sketch out in my mind what I could make during the coming day of restrictions and rest. It reminded me of planning for many people, but since the pandemic started, I've only planned for three: my father, my mother, and me.

I wondered what to make for the upcoming Thanksgiving. Putting on some music would possibly help, so I turned on some soft tinkling orchestral music as I browsed through more recipes to make.

For some reason, I started researching turkey illnesses and eventually landed on the Wikipedia page for the pandemic.

The Pandemic, also known as the Global Pandemic, is an ongoing worldwide pandemic of a disease by which the causes are still unknown, despite it being around for 1.6 years as of November 19th, 2054. The novel illness was first identified from an outbreak in the capital city around August 2052. Attempts of immediate quarantine of all those within failed, allowing the virus to spread to other areas of the country and later worldwide^[1]. The Central Virus Agency (CVA) declared the outbreak a worldwide health emergency on September 11th, 2054, and a pandemic in the afternoon of the same day. However, they refuse to comment further. As of November 18th, 2022, the pandemic had caused more than 839 million cases and 838 million confirmed deaths^[2], making it a pandemic with one of the highest death ratios ever to be known by the world.

For some reason, that's all it had on the pandemic, which was a little strange. *Why hasn't anyone written anything?* I clicked on the *Edit* button and for some reason, I couldn't edit it.

I sighed and continued scrolling through the list of recipes for gigantic turkeys and large pieces of dessert. But all of those were out of scope since there aren't enough people to eat it, and

even if there were, there still wouldn't be enough ingredients from the limited supply we got from the government to make any good food.

I finished up finding things to eat in time for the ten o'clock mandatory curfew. I decided on two dishes: a turkey and my favorite dessert.

The sun began to lower itself under the horizon for another trip over the other side of the world. My room darkened as the lights of the city quietly wink out representing the millions of people all isolated from each other. The city dimmed with the hopes of all of its residents to celebrate with their families.

This Thanksgiving was truly not one to be thankful for.

I looked up to the only positive part of the pandemic, the peace caused by the curfew. The dark sky revealed itself to me and the expanses of space looked back at me. *Surely someone else is looking at the same stars and the same sky and waiting for the same day I hope for every night.*

Maybe someone else cares besides me.

<Amber>

Three pairs of feet pounded their way down the street to an opening among the houses. The scent of plants, flowers, and fresh air wafted into my nose as we raced passed house after house towards the park.

"Alicia! Robert! I'm finally here," I panted as I walked towards the swingset where they were standing. "Sorry! I overslept my alarm and I meant to come earlier!"

"Pft, it's fine! Just come over here right now!" Robert yelled, gesturing seemingly frantically in his direction.

I ran over to him and Alicia hopped off the swing to greet me. “You would never believe what I just saw, the caterpillar was so weird!”

Birds chirped in the woods and leaves crunched under my shoes as I followed Alicia out of the playground to the quiet yet bustling forest behind our houses.

“You would never have guessed how weird those things looked! Like, look at this one! So loooong!”

“Eww, why do you even like those things? They’re so strange!”

We walked beside a creek that we had been walking next to since we were little. The serenity of it all quieted my fifth-grade mind as we paced down the stream toward my house.

I glimpsed a squirrel run by us and took the lead. My house came into view when we turned the corner.

We quietly walked towards my house using a roundabout way for a couple of minutes in silence before I interrupted the quiet of nature with a “So...”

“So what?”

“Do you want to play a board game or something at my house before you head home?”

“Yes, please!”

<Josh>

I woke up at four in the afternoon, refreshed from my temporary sleep, and walked to the kitchen. I broke out our stored, dried rosemary to begin making the centerpiece of the dinner taking place in the evening.

I wasted some of my precious time fiddling with different levels of seasonings and related things and smelled some of them to see if it was okay. It smelled great. I stuck the turkey

in the oven after I finished preparing it and sat back to look at my computer for a bit while I waited for it to be done cooking.

I opened my computer to the screen of my favorite messaging app but quickly switched windows after realizing nothing of interest had popped up over the past six hours of not looking at the screen.

An empty feeling resided in my gut. *What am I missing in this life? Just waiting? Waiting for what?*

For what? Someone, to bring me out of this pit of information telling me about everything? This pandemic?

<Amber>

I strolled down the hallway to the living room where Ash and Dad were already sitting at the dinner table. I went to go sit down as Mom set down the last two plates of spaghetti in front of me and herself. Silence filled the room as we all ate together without a word.

All of a sudden, I asked, “Mom, Dad, I have a question.”

“Yes? What is it, darling?” said my father.

“Well... I was wondering why so many people were dying across the city if everyone is literally inside their own houses for safety and *not* dying. Because I mean, it’s weird and it’s confusing me a lot,” I answered solemnly as I poked at my food.

“Well, yes, we all know it’s confusing, but I think in this whole city people are dying because they just aren’t being careful enough,” answered Dad as he took a bite of his spaghetti.

Mom faced me with a questioning look and asked, “Did something happen, darling? You don’t usually ask these types of questions...”

“Yeah, it’s nothing, it’s just that the deaths are a little bit weird,” I said as I scratched my head.

Ash rolled his eyes. “Yeah, it’s a *deadly pandemic*, what do you think?”

“Anyway, whatever. Mom, the dinner was awesome! How did you make it? Tell me!” I asked my mom.

“Thanks, but it’s just some pasta, oregano, basil sauce, tomato sauce, and *voila!* It’s done!” Mom said, smiling.

“Mmm, that was great, thanks. And what about you, Dad? How– how’s– work been doing?” I stuttered.

“Oh... Well, it’s been okay, I guess. Why? Is everything okay? Nothing wrong?” my dad asked with a quizzical look in his eyes.

“Oh yeah, everything’s fine, it’s just you know it’s dinner time, family time, so that’s why I wanted to be right on with the family of mine!” I said softly and hesitantly.

Thoughts churned in my mind. *My family just – ignored me.*

“Oh... Okay! Great! Well it’s getting late so let’s all get to bed, shall we?” said my dad as we all finished eating our dinner and put our dishes in the dishwasher.

“Yeah, we should get to bed, it’s getting a bit late. Good night, everybody! Love you, guys!” I said.

I waved goodnight and walked down the hallway, up the stairs, and into my room. I changed into my pajamas and read a few chapters of a book, until again, at 11:59, I sat awake on my bed, looking at the clock and waiting until the stars shone again tonight.

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11:59 shone the numbers in the darkness next to my bed. I counted the ticks of the clock until the numbers fell into place. *Almost time.*

I climbed out of bed and peeked out my window to look outside, waiting for the almost supernatural beauty of the sky to take my breath away. The lights of the city dimmed to reveal the bright shining of the stars, the same ones that looked down on us when I was five years old, playing with my friends with no masks, and now. I could see my star-studded reflection as I leaned out the window, basking in the starlight. As I began to return to bed, though, I noticed a pinprick of light shining out from behind the house across the street.

I tiptoed across the room towards my window and pinched apart my blinds with two fingers to peer outside curiously to investigate what was happening. I saw a few people looking down the alleyway with flashlights.

I stared for a little while before looking at the logo on the back of their uniforms. A moment passed before it registered in my brain that *that was the logo of the government office responsible for the pandemic information.*

My mouth dropped open and I stood frozen, paralyzed with fear. *What are they doing over there?* Suddenly, a flash of light shone from the road. Shivers ran down my spine.

Across the street, a syringe plunged into my elderly neighbor, gagged at the mouth, and dragged from her post in bed to the street by these government officials.

What am I going to do? What are they doing? Are they killing her? I shuddered. I envisioned her screams as they muted her for eternity, never to be heard again.

Thoughts raced through my head as I quickly retreated from my window.

Did he see me? Did he just kill her? Is that why so many people are dying? What in the world? This can't be happening.

“I better go tell Ash,” I murmured to myself as I crept out my doorway and silently tiptoed down the hallway into Ash’s room. A rectangular light shone through the darkness: his phone on full brightness.

“*Psst! Ash! ASH! Are you awake?*”

He sighed and rolled over but didn’t wake up, so I sneaked silently toward him and shook him as hard as I could to wake him up.

“Ash! C’mon, wake up!” I yelled at his face.

“Huh? What? Wha- happened?” he yawned as he woke up, finding his phone on his face.

“Ash, I just saw our neighbor across the street *die*.”

“Uh-huh.”

“No, seriously! I watched them for, like, 10 minutes, and they came in, and took her out of her house, and stuck a syringe into her and she stopped moving! Hurry up, wake up! They’re still there, dragging her body!”

Ash rolled his eyes and laid back down, sighing.

“It’s for real! We need to do something! Let’s go to their stupid offices tomorrow and sort this out. Why are people dying? I’m just going to barge in, this has to stop!”

“Uh-huh... Wait, what? Wait, someone died? Show me now, hurry up. What the heck?”

Ash exclaimed quietly as he rubs his head. I lead Ash by the hand to my room. As we got to my room, Ash crept to the window, put his eye up to the blinds, and gasped.

“Wha-” Ash cut off. “They might kill *us*!” His breathing intensified as what he said sunk in.

“Huh? *We* might be targets? Wait, I’m dumb. Seriously? What the...? *Ash, get away from the window right now! They’ll see you!*”

“Shush, Amber! Don’t talk so loud!”

My voice dropped to a whisper. “What should we do? I didn’t know that *that’s* what the virus is! Ash!”

“I don’t know! Don’t let them know?”

“Good idea. Promise? That you will never say this to a living soul? Because if you say that on SNS, we’ll end up like her.” I pointed out the window and imitated a dead body.

Ash backed up from the window. “I promise, I swear that I won’t tell a living soul about it, except for you. You too?”

“Yeah, of course. Ash, what do you want to do? This is big.”

“Well, it’s obviously the government doing it, what do you think? They’re the ones who did it, right?”

“Sure, I guess so. So I’ll just go run into their offices and make them stop!”

“No, don’t be so rash!”

“People are *dying*, Ash. We have to do something?”

“It’s too late to think about this. Get to bed. We have a lot of talking to do tomorrow about, you know, *this*,” my brother countered.

I eyed the window and shoved Ash out of my room. “Good night!” *As if a good night could exist now.* As I lay awake in bed with Vivian by my side, I thought, *everything is about to change.*

<Josh>

Every day I walked down the street to arrive at the place that I most dreaded and hated. Walking to school by myself, getting teased by my so-called friends. Every day I navigated friendships and grades and whatnot to keep pushing through life. Sometimes I'd go over to my friend's house to play, but that stressed me out.

Grass, dandelions, and flowers lined the road to school as I skipped to the field in the morning. Carefully tended to and cared for every day by the lively grandmas and grandpas, always ready to greet me.

I tied knots and squeezed flowers into shapes to please myself and my friends. With someone to listen to me and someone to hear speak, I strode down the road toward the home where I've lived. The laughter of children playing outside made me smile as I looked up from my paper and pencil.

Playing ball outside school added a little bit of social interaction to my pre-pandemic life and a splash of color to my otherwise dull life.

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What the... I haven't seen this webpage before. I whispered to myself as I prepared to scroll down the list of notable deaths.

Several important officials in the far right-hand party – dead. *So that's why none of them have been showing up in my news recently.*

I closed my eyes and sighed. *Why all of a sudden they died? And why only them?*

All those people, dead. A shiver ran down my back.

“All of them developed symptoms and died peacefully, asleep.” *Why these people? What did they do wrong, world? Why only them? Why, why?*

My mind slows down to comprehend the massive scale of death. The deaths were not just another statistic, a blip on the chart of life. *These were the people I trusted. The people who I listened to on the radio. The people on TV. Why did they die?*

Death hung in the air. *Why those people? Did the universe hate them? Them specifically?* I walked over to the oven as it let out a tone reminiscent of the blues music of long-dead musicians.

<Amber>

I lay in bed for a while before the tinkling of a chime sounding from my computer jolted me back to reality. I groaned, sat up, and convinced myself to get out of bed. I check my computer and see it came from Discord. Alicia and Robert were calling me, *again*.

Alicia had been my best friend ever since kindergarten. We always slept over at each others' houses, had playdates every day after school, and went on outings together. We were the best of friends, but ever since the pandemic started, all we could do was voice call or message each other.

Robert was my other best friend; I met him around the same time Alicia and I first met each other, too. We were the trio.

As I continued to read my messages, a dialog popped up bearing an invitation to a video call with the same friends I'd just been thinking about.

“Alicia!” I exclaimed happily. “I was just thinking about you!”

“Amber!! I miss you so much!” squealed Alicia.

“I know! Me too! But did you see the news? On the news chat? Like, why are there so many deaths when everyone’s literally inside their homes?”

“Yeah, I guess,” she said after a little pause. “I was wondering a bit as well, why there are so many deaths even though like, *everyone’s at home.*”

Another chime sounded as Robert logged on to say hello.

“Heyy! Robert! You’re here! *Finally!*”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m here, *finally,*” Robert replied. “*And* did you hear about the deaths? I mean like *what?* I heard one of your neighbors, like, even died, Amber!”

“Yeah, we know,” Alicia and I both said in sync.

“We were both talking about it right now. Like, it’s so confusing because like literally *everyone* in the city is like inside their homes, just stuck there,” I said seriously.

“Hmm... Well yeah, that’s a bit weird, but it’s also true, suspicious...” answered Robert

“Well, sorry, I have to go now I have to talk to my brother.”

I logged off, and the more I thought about everything from last night, the more afraid I became. I walked over to Ash’s room so we could talk a bit more about the past night’s events.

Knock. “Hey, Ash. Can I come in?” I asked.

“Yeah, come in,” he answered back from his bedside posture.

“So yeah, what are we going to do? Should we tell Mom and Dad? Or should we-” I asked but then suddenly got caught off guard by a knock on the front door. I freeze, trying to remember anything that could explain such a bizarre occurrence.

“Oh, shoot, I hope it’s not the person I made eye contact with. Please don’t be,” I prayed quietly to myself.

We started walking down the hallway, and when I opened the door, it was someone with a badge from the government. “*Oh heavens...*” I said under my breath.

“Uhm- Who are you, sorry?” asked Mom.

“Well, good afternoon. I work for the CVA and I have a couple of questions for your daughter, here. I’m here to check if you have seen anything suspicious or different lately. Have you?” he asked as he showed his ID.

After a moment of silence, he added, “Just checking around to see if anything’s wrong.”

“O-oh hello the-there! We haven’t seen anything suspicious, but is there something you want us to look out for?” stuttered Dad.

“Yeah, is anything out of sorts? We can keep an eye out,” Mom said.

“Yes, yes, something is. Thank you for answering, but I was specifically asking your daughter here. So, we’re gonna take her in for questioning, thank you.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’s necessary,” Dad said as he pulled Ash and me back into our house, clenching our shoulders hard.

“Let me go!” I whined as I was forcibly dragged back into the house away from the outside world. I pulled away from my dad’s grip, leaped off the steps, and ran down the street towards the past.

<Josh>

The wilted flowers sitting on our dining room table didn’t even begin to shine a light on the natural wonders outside. *I can hear the birds calling to me.*

I trotted down the steps to where my mom was working downstairs on her computer. She looked up and asked me where I was going.

“Just peeking outside for some fresh air!”

She didn't try to stop me, though, being so engrossed in her computer and work. I flew down the steps in front of our house onto the long-since-abandoned street in front of me.

The bush on the right side of the street had sustained itself throughout the pandemic and I used it to guide myself in the direction of hope.

<Amber>

My feet pounded down the street, down the lane, past where my neighbor had passed away, past the river, to the woods. I happened to glance right as I ran past the woods where I used to play as a child. When I had been *free*.

This park looks familiar.

Everything flooded back into my mind. Dandelions lined the deserted outskirts of the playground, growing tall and resolute without anyone to cut them down. Flowers twined around each other, strong even amid the most uncertain time ever faced by humanity.

A small, landlocked pond was forming under the play structure, resilient against the odds, unaware of all the pain being faced by the humans around it.

<Josh>

I turned the corner and was startled to run into another person that I hadn't expected to meet. She looked extremely different from how she did four years ago when we last met in elementary school. She had longer hair, she got taller, she had a different style of clothes and her face changed a bit. Her eyes were a bit bigger, too.

My first encounter with someone outside my family since two years ago, I breathed to myself.

“Josh! Oh my gosh! It’s been so long!” Amber approached me and practically hopped back and forth between her two legs.

I hesitantly approached her as if she carried the deadly virus.

Silence engulfed us as I pondered what to say next.

“Why are you here?” I asked after a moment’s hesitation.

“I don’t know, I just ran away from some weird guy who works for the government because they were asking me and my family if we saw anything suspicious.”

We both sit there in silence, thinking about what to say.

“Wait, isn’t the government the one who wants us to stay at home? Why would they come?”

“Can I trust you with something?” asked Amber all of a sudden.

“What? Wait – we just got here. Can we catch up, or something –”

“But Josh, I need to tell you something right now, and it’s very important so if you say it, you might get killed. Do you understand me? Don’t tell a single soul.”

“Okay, I won’t, I promise. Jeez, I just got out of my house for the first time in *years*, breathe,” I said. I took a few deep breaths, embracing the fresh air I forgot about.

“Josh. This pandemic *isn’t real*.”

I held my breath. “Hah, yeah, *uh huh*. I hope you haven’t become a conspiracy theorist yourself now, going crazy with your family.”

“No, really. I saw these crazy people kill my neighbor the other day, right in front of my eyes. Then a government person knocked on our door the *next day*. Can’t you see it? It all connects. Haven’t you looked at those obituary lists? Like a quarter of the deceased are the people in the opposing party from the one who runs the epidemic research.”

Could it really be true? It's too good to be true, but at the same time, we can't change it if it's real. We can't regain it, can we?

Amber suddenly announced, "I'm just going to take off my mask now."

I laughed and playfully swatted her shoulder but she quickly countered, "I'm serious."

Her hand slowly reached up to release the left string and I stopped breathing. *How could she?* She betrayed me. I held my breath as if that would stop the deadly particles from flying toward me.

The force of her beaming smile met my eyes. The smile I never had the chance to see on anyone.

We can't go back to before – but we can move ahead.

The beauty of the park struck me again as I stared in wonder at the trees and my stress evaporated. Everything that I lost could be mine.

"It's not true about what you think it is! The pandemic isn't real, Josh! The government is just using the money we spend on masks, food, and vaccines to further their desires! I just took off my mask right now and I smelled everything I haven't smelled in so long. Like fresh air, grass, dirt, and everything else! You need to trust me! I need to fix this!" She took a breath. "They've been censoring us! Haven't you tried to write about the pandemic online?!"

Amber ran off away from the oasis in this crazy world, down the street, ready to do whatever it took to make everything normal.

I took off after her.

<Amber>

I started sprinting away from the park that I went to when I was in elementary school and I suddenly remembered everything. I remembered everything about what happened before the pandemic. Hanging out with my best friends, having sleepovers every weekend, going to this same park every day to play and get some fresh air, the place where I first learned how to ride a bike, where I cried in Ash's arms because I fell from the swings, where Ash and I got ice cream and played tag, chasing each other around in circles until we collapsed from exhaustion.

I wanted that feeling back – the exhilarating fun of being with others and playing with friends. My anger at the government peaked and I let out a shout as I sprinted down the road back home.

Tomorrow, I resolved, I will go make this world a better place and make it right, my way.

I took a quick look around to make sure that no one is looking at me then whipped out my phone to find where the virus agency keeps their offices.

I will fix this problem.

Suddenly, I heard pounding footsteps behind me, catching up as I turned to stare. Josh, out of breath, jogged up to me and yelled, “Stop!”

“You don't even know what I'm doing!”

“Just calm down for a second!”

“But the pandemic isn't real... The pandemic isn't real! No more masks! Do you understand?! But how am I supposed to show everybody that? Any ideas?” I shouted.

Josh shook his head.

“You have to be the change you want to see in the world! I'm going to go make those idiots over at the virus agency understand!”

“But don’t you realize? You don’t have to do that, Amber! Move forward!”

I wavered for a little bit.

You don’t have to do that, Amber!

“Amber! *You’re* the one in charge of your life, not them! Nothing good will come out of you storming in!”

His words echoed in my mind.

“At the very least, you should go home! Your family must be looking for you!”

I turned to face him.

“Go home, Amber!”

So I went back home and slowly went up the stairs, heart pounding, worried that the official was still there.

As I opened the door slowly, Mom came rushing towards me and worriedly asked me, “*AMBER!* Oh my goodness? Are you ok? Are you hurt? Answer me, honey, are you there?”

“Yes, Mom, I’m *still alive*, and also I’m fine. Guess what? I met Josh from elementary school at the park today! I had so much fun! You wouldn’t believe what we talked about-”

I got cut off when Ash hugged me tightly. “Where were you? Are you alright?” asked Ash sharply. He squeezed me into a giant hug.

“I can’t breathe well in here-”

“Sorry, but seriously, are you ok?” Ash asked as he put his hands on my shoulders looking me dead in the eyes. I didn’t notice I had been gone for four hours straight, so it was already dinner time. I sighed. “Yes, Ash, yeah, I’m fine,” I answered with a roll of my eyes.

We ate dinner in silence until Dad interrupted my thoughts, smiling. “I’m glad you’re safe and you got back home safely.”

As I ate, I knew all of their eyes were on me, but I was grinning because I had figured something out, something valuable at last, finally.

“Well, good night everybody, I love you!” I told them. They all rushed to me and hugged me as they said, “We all love you too, Amber, don’t forget that.” I ran away from their hugs as fast as I could as tears formed in my eyes.

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At 11:59, I sat awake on my bed, looking at the clock and waiting for midnight to come so I could take my rest.

“56... 57... 58... 59... midnight,” I whispered to myself as the lights clicked into place as they had been doing for centuries, no matter what happened.

The lights of the city winked out upon my poorer suburb as they had for years and years prior.

It worked on me every time, the stars appearing in the beautiful night sky, shining bright as if they were filled with hope and trying to tell me the answer or at least something. I didn’t want any more trouble again, so I closed my curtains, got under my sheets, and went to bed, smiling with Vivian cuddled in my arms, knowing that the pandemic was fake and that I could breathe in the same air I used to breathe in years ago. And as I went to bed, I opened my window and fresh air blew in, flowing through my nostrils, and lightening my soul. So as I walked back to bed, picking Vivian up from the floor, I snuggled with her. “You know, I will change the world one day. One day, society will flow again.”