

After

“8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Take off !” I look at Carter who’s sitting directly across from on the space shuttle. He’s smiling as we accelerate into the air. I grip on the handlebars firmly and laugh because this moment shouldn’t be happening but it is. I ’ll be with you soon I think to the moon.

Before

As the sweat drips down my neck, I realize I've been up since 3 A.M. sitting on the roof of my family's little farmhouse watching the moon slowly disappearing and the sun take its place. I play with the red chipped paint, that my older brother Damian promised Mom and Pap to repaint months ago, but of course, it didn't happen. It's 70 degrees but feels like 90. Once I realize what the day is my hands spread pale like starfish. Today is the town meeting where the mayor discusses new ideas and opportunities for our pity little mud bath we call a town. Skyfall. Our town is so boring, the only thing that interests me is talking to the moon. I talk to the moon every chance I get, asking for something different to happen—something exciting and worth thinking about every so often.

“Junie come shower and get dress so you can eat. Now” my mother calls from the ground.

“Coming mom” I yell back. I crawl to the other side of the roof and throw my legs over the edge. I crawl down and grab the edge of my window and climb in, sloppily landing on my bed.

“Hey Junie, maybe today the moon will finally give you something different.” my older brother Damian says in a mocking voice. I stare at him as he walks away, no one believes that the moon actually talks back to me. My family marked me off as crazy when I first introduced the moon as a friend.

“Junie! You almost ready?” Pap yells from the kitchen. I forget the shower and just throw on jean shorts and shirt. I walk to the kitchen, taking a seat.

“I wonder what today’s Town Hall Meeting is about. Probably something boring,” my other older brother Matty says. The look on my Mom’s face is blank like she’s scared of something or someone. Pap notices her expression and changes the subject asking how the eggs taste.

“Like eggs,” I smirk at that too. I look at the old kitchen table. The brown wood has so many scratches & many memories.

“I guess everyone's done eating,” Mom says with an attitude as she gets up and takes my plate and Paps. She puts our dishes in the sink and starts cleaning them off then she mutters,

“You two can clean your own plates.” Everyone gets up and gets ready to leave. I run back to my room and make sure my windows are shut.

The rest of my family starts walking, with me not so far behind. The whole town is going to Center Falls. A small but big enough area with a raggedy but stable stage and looking towards it about 350 chairs, accommodating the entire town. We take our usual but not assigned seats right in the 3rd row. I see almost all the kids in my class.

“Smile Junie,” my mom says, I don't. I get lost in my thoughts and realize I missed the song as they finish it off,

“And with glory and dignity, the town of Skyfall will go on.” As the song ends we remove our hands from our chest and sit down. We wait for the mayor and his secretary to come forward.

When he walks onto the stage, his hair is disheveled and the buttons to his shirt aren't lined up correctly. Matty and Damien turn to each other snicker.

“Looks like Mr. Mayor was doing a little more than talking with his secretary.” They both laugh. I can't help but crack a smile. So does Pap.

“ We have come up with a solution to put Skyfall on the map,” the mayor says and smiles deviously. I'm scared but also very interested. He continues,

“For as long as I remember Skyfall has always been considered unknown town in the south. No one knows we’re here and quite frankly I’m just not okay with that anymore” he makes a sad face and looks down like Skyfall being so unknown truly devastated him.

“Now let's talk about space.”

We’re back home now and mom isn’t so intrigued by the idea of me going to space.

“Mom comes on please people never get an opportunity to travel to space especially as kids.”

I shout as we walk back to our house. The town meeting is over. The mayor wants to take 6 boys and girls from the ages 14-17 to outer space so we can feel how it is in space but the horrifying part is we might not make it back.

“No Junie and that's finally what makes you think I would ever agree to that. Do you want to die? Or you just want to prove a point? Conversation over.” I retreat back to my room and began writing my essay on why I should be picked to go into space.

It’s night time. I blink my eyes trying to remember where I am.

“My life” I mutter and lie up. I must've fallen asleep writing that essay. I eye the papers on my bed, then squint my eyes at the clock on the wall.

“3:02 am” I whisper. Casually, I climb out my room, on to the roof. I scratch my ankle on a rusty screw.

“Crap,” I say under my breath trying not to wake my parents. I keep climbing ignoring the little blood slithering down my foot and on the ground. I finally get on the roof and tonight’s a beautiful night. The circular moon is unbelievably bright and paradisiacal.

“I have so much to tell you but I just don't even know where to start,” I say trying to spot craters.

“Whats on your mind ?” The moon replies eyeing my cut.

“ I’ve been offered a deal of a lifetime, well not just me and not me at all. You see the mayor is selecting 6 boys and girls to travel to space and I-I could finally be with you. You know I hate it down here.”

“What's the catch Junie Bird?” he asks knowingly. Looking down, I try to avoid answering his question.

“Juniper, what is it?” Now sounding irritated I reply

“We might not making it back, well the others won’t make it back. I would stay regardless.”

“Now Junie, you know I love you deeply but being in space isn’t all it's cracked up to be, I sometimes wish I could be a human.” I eye the moon angrily.

“You get to see the whole world. You get to count the stars and talk to other planets. You know how horrible my life is down here.” I yawn.

“Good night Junie bird.”

I play with the blood on my ankle, touching it then sucking my finger. I stare at the moon and just imagine myself in space, actually walking in the air, not needing a space suit, just me walking touching the stars and getting closer and closer to the moon and then I’m there. I wake up a few hours later. My clothes drenched in sweat.

“Dammit” I throw myself, off the roof running back into the house through the front door, heading straight for the shower. Realizing I have an hour and a half to get my essay to the mayor’s office and I’m a complete mess. Quickly washing my body with my right hand and washing my hair with my left, I turn the cold water off and put on my most sophisticated attire. Grabbing my essay and starting my 0.2 miles to the mayor's office.

“Am I in over my head?” I ask myself. “

“Is my family’s lifetime of disappointment and sadness worth more than my very own happiness and desires?”

“It doesn't have to be” a voice says. I turn around and see a boy I have never seen before.

“What?” I say trying to sound as dauntless as possible. He smiles.

“You said is my family’s lifetime of disappointment and sadness worth more than my very own happiness and desires?” I stop walking.

“I don't know you so back off.” I said analyzing him. Tall, light curly brown skin hair, dark brown skin. What catches me off guard is one eye is blue and the other is dark brown. I continue to walk again and he follows. I realize he’s carrying a folder in his left arm. Which means he probably trying to get into the space program as well. We walk in silence. I walk with my head down, avoiding stepping on twigs.

“Carter.” the boy says.

“What?” I asked still walking with my head down.

“My name is Carter,” he says.

“Junie,” I say adjusting my shirt as we reach the entrance to the office. We’re greeted by the secretary.

“Please have a seat,” she says motioning to the metal chairs. We do as we’re told. I watch her, very intriguing. She’s wearing too much lipstick and her perfume is so strong I might faint. I cough and Carter looks back at me as he walks into his interview. Once Carter is done with his interview and it's my turn. I stand up.

“It was nice meeting you Junie,” he says exiting the building.

“You too” I mutter.

I walk through the overly dramatic detailed doors. His office is beautiful. Burgundy carpet, gaudy white chairs, the artwork of women with moles. I’ve never seen anything like it.

Mayor Matkins is staring out the window, arms folded behind him.

“Junie, please take a seat.” he starts off. I take a seat in the white chair which isn’t as comfortable as it should be.

“Why do you want to go to space?” he asks back still towards me.



“Well I believe I would be a good candid-” he cuts me off.

“I don’t want an overly practiced response that you think I want to hear.” I start again.

“Honestly, Mayor Matkins, I’m only 14, 15 soon and these 14 years of my life have been just mediocre. All I want is to do is travel & experience life to a new intensity that I’ve never felt before. I want to feel the anticipation of the countdown until takeoff. I want to be free.” I finish anxious about my answer. He’s facing me now. Analyzing my face. My collar is irritating my skin and I urged to scratch it but I don’t.

“There are 60 people including yourself who think they should be selected. Only 6 can go. Why should I pick you? Why should I use such a large proportion of the miniscule amount of money this town has on you out of 54 other candidates? ” his voice has changed. He sounds agitated.

“ I can handle myself, my actions are docious and if I truly believed going to space wasn’t for me I wouldn’t dare walk through those double doors and be sitting here with you. Everyone has their faults, But I’m the most qualified person for this program. Also I-”

“I find your confidence rather refreshing but considering that you’re 14 you might not know you are. This trip is mind-boggling, maybe your limitry isn’t as good as you think.” I try to defend myself.

“But why judge me by age than-”

“That's enough, thank you for your time. I'll read your essay. You can find the list of the selected participants in the lobby in a week from now.” I stand up and thank him for having me. The 0.2-mile walk feels nice since the sun is setting. Once I’m finally home it's almost dark. I walk into an intensely amount of silence. My parents both asleep on the couch lay there in very awkward and uncomfortable positions. I wish I could talk to them and explain how I really feel about my life. My brothers so nonchalant about everything aggravates me so I avoid talking to them. I walk quietly into my bedroom not turning the light on but directly climbing out my window on to the roof.

“So tell me about it,” the moon says as I get comfortable. I ignore him and number the stars that glisten around him.

“Juniper?” I turn away from his gaze and look at a tree I used to climb when I was little. Its height is almost 103 feet. I remember my first time climbing all the way to the top, I could see the whole town, from up there Skyfall looked kinda beautiful. Ever since then my family would

call me Junie Bird. Coming back to reality, I realized ignoring the moon wouldn't change anything.

"I had the interview with the mayor, I could tell he liked me but he kept bringing up my age. He used it against me" I say the last part in a hushed tone as if the Mayor could hear me.

"Go on," he replies as if my age isn't a factor.

"I could honestly tell he liked me, just didn't want to admit it. Also, I met this boy name Carter, he's also trying to go to space as well. He's really cool actually." The moon smiles at me. I smile back. Not even vocally speaking to each other but somehow we're both thinking the same thing. The moon winks at me because he knows I'm getting sleepy. The man on the moon, the moon in the man.

The next morning I wake up in my own bed, probably the doing of Damian. I tell my parents I want to go to the library as everyone else heads out for the day.

The library is basically a 50x by 50x building with a brown brick facade. Surprisingly sky falls can afford the millions of book that miraculously fit in here. As soon as I walk in I see Carter. He doesn't notice me at first. He's reading the book and biting his fingernail simultaneously.

"Hey Carter," I say approaching his table. He immediately wipes his finger on his shirt.

“Hi, how are you ?” he asks me nervously.

“I've been better. Just patiently waiting to see if I'm going into the sky & remain in oblivion until I die to lack of air ventilation.” I say, sitting down. He laughs.

“Considering you're only 14, you are very intellectual. I like that about you. It's like a breath of fresh air being around someone who is as smart as me” he laughs again and I look down shyly.

He stares at me, intensely. He can see right through me.

“You have sad eyes.” He starts off.

“You know when I look at you, I see a girl with a huge heart but with the disappointment that takes place in your life, you let it reflect and define you.” I look down.

“Yo-You, don't know me, please-please stop speaking as if you do.” I manage to say

“No doubt. Since we're going to be cramped in a rocket ship for an unpredictable amount of time, we mind as well get to know each other now.” I smile.

“Well let's start with my moon obsession” we both laugh and this is the first time in a while where I feel like the moon isn't the only place I rather am.

The rest of the time leading up to when the list is posted goes by slow. Carter and I hang out what seems like to be every day. As we wait outside the mayor's office we sit and play with each other's hands while the other 58 people stand agitated in the scorching sun. The mayor's secretary finally comes out taking her time. Its silent and the only sound is her heels hitting the floor. She posts the paper on the important events on board.

“And there you go.” she says as she takes a bow and casually walks back into the building.

“Lets let, everyone, go first .” Carter says pulling me to the side. I nod. Everyone is going up to the list and checking their names. Some look expressionless and others look like they could cry as they walk away.

“ I knew I would make it.” Some boy name Mason says as he cockily walks away from us. It seems like 40 minutes until everyone has cleared out. I look at Carter.

“Are you ready ?” I ask pulling at my fingernail. He nods knowingly. I walk up to the wall, not looking at the paper itself but the paper in whole. The fancy black writing that only has 6 names printed on it. The fancy intricate designs in each corner. Carter touches my shoulder lightly.

“Just look.” he says

“Okay, I’ll look, Okay we have Mason, Aria, Carter h-” He looks at me and I look at him so stunned and shocked.

“Carter” I yell. “ You’re in! You’re in !” I hug him so tightly, I can feel his heart beating rapidly against me.

“Can we sit down for a second?” he asks still hugging me tightly.

“Of course” I say into his chest. We sit down on the steps and catch our breaths. Staring at the sun slowly disappearing. I rub his back at slow paces, like how Matty did to me after Pap would beat me. We sit there for a while inhaling the perfect breeze that drifts throughout Skyfall.

“Junie there are still 3 more names I didn't read yet.” I take my head off his shoulder and let him get up. His fingers start at the top and follow as he reads the names.

“ Mason, Aria, Carter, Finn, Zoey, and Juniper Warren.” He turns around and opens his arm out towards me and I run to him. I can feel tears raining out of my eyes. He pulls away and wipes them. Then he kisses me on the cheek. I laugh and start sprinting to my house.

“Hey ! Where are you going?” Carter yells at me still standing where I left.

“I have somebody important to tell!” I call back. I run all the way home. Everyone is in the living room watching our favorite movie.

*“I remember when my dad gave me that gun. He told me that I should never point it at anything in the house and that he'd rather I'd shoot at tin cans in-”* Pap pauses the movie at the sight of me.

“Junie, what's wrong?” Damian asks me standing up.

Out of breath I still stand there bent over, hands on my knees breathing as if someone tried to drown me. I look at my family, not wanting to ruin their peaceful night but not wanting to ruin the best night of my life.

“I’m going to space” Not wanting to hear their negative responses I go straight to my room, out the window and on to the roof and guess who’s already there waiting for me.

“Congratulations Junie Bird.” he greets me.

“No, congratulations to us. Two friends finally getting to see each other.” he laughs.

“Now I understand the definition of long-distance relationships.” I laugh too.

The time up until I leave goes by fast. Damian and Matty congratulate me because it's not every day you get to go to space. My parents don't speak of it but they know it's going to happen. I spend the rest of my time going through space preparatory classes with the other participants which aren't that fun since everyone is making it seem like a competition when we already won. It's the night before we go and I need to talk to the moon one last time like this.

“Are you nervous Junie Bird?” The moon asks me.

“Yes, because what if you don't recognize me in person?” we both laugh hysterically.

“Seriously though I'm not nervous, this is what I wanted deep down more than anything, now that I have and it's in the tip of my fingers, I feel like I can relax again and stop being anxious, it's not going anywhere”

“Good to hear it Junie Bird. I'll see you in a few hours.”

“I'll be the one in silver”. I reply jokingly.

“Good night Junie Bird.” I smile at him as I make my way off the roof. Tonight I'll sleep in my own bed since I won't be here for a while. I dream of something other than the moon tonight. I



dream of telling my grandkids how I went to the moon and how I was only a 14-year-old girl with goals bigger than the earth and accomplished before I even started high school. I dream of telling them that they can do it too.

“Junie wake up.” I blink my eyes as Matty stands over me smiling.

“It's time.” I smile and pinch myself. By the time I get to the send-off event people from all over are here. Everyone is divided into two sides and in the middle is an isle where all the participants walk down leading up on the rocket. When it's my turn to walk down. I turn back to my family who stands in tears.

“We're never too old for a group hug,” I said shrugging my shoulders. The group embrace is long and dramatic. Shockingly I don't want it to come to an end. But it does. As my name is called I wave a kiss to my family one more time and walk down the aisle. Thousands of people clapping, cheering my name and videotaping me. Before I get into the shuttle I turn back to for the final wave and put my space helmet on. It's finally time. The doors closed. Everyone is seated and secured. The countdown begins-

“8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Take off !” I look at Carter who's sitting directly across from me. He's smiling as we accelerate into the air. I grip on the handlebars firmly and laugh because this moment shouldn't be happening but it is. I'll be with you soon I think to the moon.

