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A Breath of Fresh Air

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Lily Bartle

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A Breath of Fresh Air

Staring out a barred window, at least I can see the green grass and blooming flower garden. My room is simple, space for a bed, a desk and a toilet. My desk is covered in charcoal drawings I've made in art class. Pictures of my friends and family. Drawings of people I miss.

Tonight is movie night, we got to vote on what movie this month, it was a close split between a football movie and a Pixar film. We're gonna watch A Bugs Life tonight. I stretch my aching muscles, still sore from yesterday's workout, and walk down to the common room. I make simple conversation with one of the guards on my way there, an older guy who likes to talk about cars and his kids. "Hey, Hank, any idea if we'll get popcorn for the movie this time?" Hank gives me a sly wink but doesn't respond. This is a running joke we've been doing for a couple of weeks now, I'd ask a question about anything and he'll just wink and say nothing.

As I enter the common room, the smell of man sweat is partially hidden with the air freshener working over time to pump out the scent of vanilla. I read somewhere that vanilla was the most relaxing smell that connects the brain with calm memories. For me, it just reminds me of my friends arguing about who's turn it is on the Xbox. Not entirely unpleasant but not entirely calming. Only one of my friends is sitting at the table today, playing cards with some guy that I'd seen around but hadn't bothered to learn his name.

"If it's not strip poker, I don't wanna play," I joke, pulling up a chair next to Dave, peeking at his hand as I do so. Dave gives me a light shove but cracks a smile like I knew he would. "I'll deal you in after I lose my underwear," Dave says, as he pulls another card from the deck. I look at his hand again and make a big show of acting like he has awful cards. The guy

he's playing with gives a light chuckle at my antics, before laying down his cards, a full house. Dave shoots me daggers as he drops his two of a kind on the table.

"I believe that's two desserts and your underwear now," says Dave's rival. "Yeah, yeah," Dave sighs and starts shuffling the cards. "Damn it, and I heard tonight was chocolate pudding." "You can share mine if you're not afraid of cooties," I say, picking up the cards Dave dealt to me and taking the seat that the other guy had left. He was now waiting in line to play Mario Kart. "Nah, it's fine. Besides, I heard that there's a cold going around so we probably shouldn't share food." I nod my head and focus on my cards, they were not very good.

Pretty soon it's time for outside time, my favorite time of the day. We file out into the brisk fall air, the fruit trees from the garden are already changing color. It's my turn to work on the garden and I don't complain at all as I pick up the wheelbarrow filled with scraps from the kitchen to be added to the compost pile. I honestly enjoy the smell of fresh dirt and the feel of dirt under my nails, kind of reminds me of when I was a kid and I would help my mom in the garden.

I ask one of the guards to open the tool shed for the hoe and he walks me over, looking tired and already sunburned from the overcast sky. "Looking forward to Halloween?" I ask, trying to make small talk as we walk. "I can't stand trick-or-treaters banging on my door. It's always when I sit down to catch up on the game too, so annoying." He's obviously not having a good day. I don't say anything else as we walk. I grab the hoe quickly and continue working on the garden, the weeds have gotten a lot thicker from last week, and I think we might have a gopher problem. I make a mental note to tell the guards about it later, but not Halloween hater over there, that's for sure.

“The tomatoes are looking pretty good,” Joe says, breaking me out of my thoughts. “Yeah, maybe we’ll be able to taste them in a week or so,” I reply, glancing over at the small patch of five healthy looking tomato plants with the combined weight of two pink tomatoes among them all. I can see some green ones in the leaves but I’m worried that we’ll lose the rest of them to birds again. “I don’t really like tomatoes,” Joe says as he continues to trim the orange tree beside me. “Why not?” I ask, glad to have someone to talk to while I work. He thinks for a moment before answering. “I just don’t like the taste. I remember back in school they would give us these shitty salads with chunks of bland tomatoes on them and since then I’ve always hated tomatoes.”

I nod along with his story, looking up at the sky warriely when I hear crows. “Well, even if they suck, I’d just be happy that all this hard work paid off for something in the end.” Joe smiles and nods his head knowingly. I’ve worked alongside him in the garden for a couple of months now and know that he gets the same kind of excitement as myself when it comes to gardening.

“Hey, have you ever thought about starting a farm when you get out?” I ask dreamily. Joe snorts at my question, amused by my optimism. “No, I don’t think so,” he answers truthfully. “Hell, I’ll be lucky to get a place with a backyard one day. But I do like the idea of maybe having some house plants. Gotta use this green thumb for something.” I laugh with him and we talk for the rest of the time, discussing nothing in particular, which is usually how our conversations go.

After about two hours of outdoor time we’re told to go inside and get cleaned up before dinner. I wash up quickly and head to the cafeteria to get in line for food. During dinner we eat

lasagna and steamed vegetables. I know one of the cooks and he prides himself in his ability to make really good meals with the limited ingredients provided. As usual, the food is really good.

After dinner, our cellblock files into the large assembly hall where we usually watch plays or stand up acts. They'd set up a large sheet for screening the movie. I sat with my friends and we settled down as the opening credits began to scroll across. It had been a long time since I'd watched the movie and I was getting such a strong nostalgia trip from it, I could tell that a lot of the other guys were getting similar feelings. It was a good day.

Citations for Inspiration

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