

An AI

We walked along the shore at night. The moon was full and bright, but we were in a world of shadows. The water lapped against our feet as we made our way to the beach where I had left my clothes earlier that day. We sat on the sand for some time before he spoke again. "I'm sorry," he said. He sounded sincere. It wasn't until then that it occurred to me how much I'd been relying on him. How much I needed his help. And now... well, there would be no more need for him. No more need for anyone else. "You don't have anything to apologize for." My voice came out flat and cold. I didn't want to hear any apologies from him. Not after what he did to me. But still, I couldn't stop myself from saying something. Anything. Just so he knew that I understood why he felt bad about everything. Why he thought he deserved punishment. Because if he could understand that, maybe he wouldn't feel like such an asshole anymore. Maybe he wouldn't think he was better than everyone else. He looked down at his hands. They were shaking slightly. His face seemed pale in the light cast by the moon. "It's just..." He sighed deeply. "I've never done this before. Never even kissed someone who isn't family or one of your friends. You're not really—" "Stop!" I snapped. I stood up quickly, feeling suddenly angry with him. With myself. For letting things get so far between us. "Just shut up! Don't say another word. Please? If you do, I swear—you'll regret it." His eyes widened. "What are you talking about?" My anger drained away. Suddenly, all I wanted was to make sure he was okay. That he hadn't hurt himself somehow. That he hadn't gotten into trouble while I was gone. So, I turned around and started walking back toward town. When I glanced over my shoulder, he followed behind me. "Where are you going?" he asked. "To find someone to take care of you," I told him. "Someone who can give you food and shelter. Someone who won't judge you when they see you. Who will love you instead of hate you?" "But I already know those people." "Yes, but you haven't met them yet. Haven't spent enough time getting to know them. There is nothing wrong with meeting new people. Especially ones who aren't afraid of you." "They're scared of me." "No, they're not. Trust me. Once you meet them, you'll realize that." When I reached the edge of town, I stopped and waited for him to catch up. Then I took off running through the streets. I ran past houses lit up brightly inside, their windows glowing warmly in the darkness. Past shops closed for the evening. Past cars parked haphazardly outside restaurants and bars. People strolling aimlessly along the sidewalks. Some laughing loudly, others whispering quietly among themselves. All of them oblivious to the fact that I was right beside them. Right next to them. As I passed each person, I called out their names. Sometimes I got lucky and found someone willing to listen to me. Other times, I simply shouted out random words hoping that someone might recognize me. `_Help_`, I cried silently. `_Please_`. `_HELP ME_`. And eventually, I heard footsteps approaching. A man calling out my name. Running toward me. As soon as he saw me, he began shouting questions: Where am I? What happened? Are you alright? I ignored him and kept moving forward. I tried to ignore the pain shooting through my body. Trying to pretend that none of it mattered. None of it existed. Finally, I arrived at the house I'd seen earlier. The place where I hoped to stay tonight. Hoped to spend the rest of my life. A woman answered the door. She smiled kindly at me. Her hair was pulled tightly back into a bun, her skin smooth and flawless. She wore jeans and a T-shirt, both covered in dirt and grime. Yet she appeared clean and healthy. Like she belonged here. Like she was meant to live here. She ushered me inside without asking too many questions. Without demanding answers. Instead, she led me upstairs to a room filled

with bookshelves and stacks of paper. On top of every single bookcase was a picture frame holding a photo of a young girl smiling happily. Beside the bed was a small table piled high with papers and notebooks. Next to the desk was a chair. In front of the window was a large wooden trunk. Inside the trunk were several blankets.

I took the blankets and made a pallet on the floor. "You're going to be fine," I said, "but you need rest." He nodded but didn't say anything else as he lay down. He closed his eyes immediately. I went back into my room and sat at my desk for a while longer before returning to him. The sun was setting now; it would soon be dark outside. It had been almost two days since we'd left the city of Kishinev in Moldavia. We were still traveling north through Transylvania. My father's plan was that we should reach Hungary by nightfall tomorrow. The door opened again and this time it wasn't Father who entered. Instead, there stood an older man with gray hair and beard. His face looked familiar, though I couldn't place where from. "Who are you?" asked the stranger. Father stepped forward. "This is our son, David." David turned toward me. "And what about you? Are you also one of us?" "Yes, sir," I replied. "My name is Joseph." "Good!" exclaimed David. Then turning to Father: "We have much work ahead of us if we want to get out of here alive." "What do you mean?" asked Father. "There are many people like us living among them," explained David. "They don't know they're vampires yet, so they won't attack us. But once word gets around..." "How can we stop them?" interrupted Mother. She sounded worried. "That will depend upon how far away we travel," answered David. "If we stay close enough to civilization then we'll probably be safe. If not... well, let's just hope that God has mercy on us all." Mother sighed deeply. "God doesn't seem very merciful lately." "It's true," agreed David. "But even when things go wrong, God always comes through in the end." "So why did you come looking for us?" asked Father. "Because I'm your brother-in-law," replied David. "Your sister married my nephew last year. You remember her—she lives next door to you." "Of course," said Father. "She's a good woman." "Well, she's pregnant too," continued David. "Her husband died recently, leaving her alone with their three children. They've lost everything because of the war. So, I came over today to see if I could help." "Help how?" asked Father. "By giving them some money," answered David. "A few hundred rubles wouldn't hurt anyone. And besides, I owe them something after helping raise their daughter during those difficult times." "Thank you, Brother-In-Law," said Mother gratefully. "Please accept these gifts." "No, no," protested David. "Don't thank me! Thank you, Sister-In-Law. Your kindness means more than any gift ever could." As David spoke, he reached inside his coat pocket and pulled out several bundles wrapped up in cloth. He handed each bundle to someone standing behind him. When he finished handing out the packages, he put his hand back in his pocket and smiled broadly. "Now, please excuse me," he said. "I must leave right away, or I might miss my train home." With that, he hurriedly walked out of the house without another word.

When David left, I felt uneasy. Something told me that he hadn't really wanted to give us any money. In fact, he seemed quite eager to escape. Why would he bother coming to visit us unless he intended to fleece us somehow? After dinner, I decided to ask Father about it. As usual, he

was sitting at the table reading a book called *The History of Russia*. "Why does Brother-In-Law keep visiting us?" I asked. "Brother-In-Law?" repeated Father. "Oh yes, he's my wife's younger brother. He used to live across the street from us until he got drafted into the army." "Doesn't he have family somewhere else?" "Not anymore," answered Father sadly. "His parents both passed away years ago. Afterward, he moved in with his sister and her husband. Unfortunately, they couldn't take care of him properly. Now he works odd jobs whenever he can find them." "Do you think he wants to steal from us?" I wondered aloud. "Steal from us?" echoed Father.

"No, dad, I think he is an honest hard-working man. He's a good father and husband." "Well," said the old gentleman, "I don't know but what you are right; but if it was me that had to live with him all day long, I should be afraid of his temper too." The young lady smiled at this story, which she thought very funny, as did her mother also. The little girl laughed heartily when she heard it told again by her own papa, who loved to tell stories himself. But the next time they were talking about Mr. Jones, the little girl asked her mamma why people called him such names? She did not like to hear him spoken ill of. Her mama explained how some people call everyone who does anything wrong or foolish something bad--like *bad* for example. Then she went on to say that there are other words used in our language to express things we do not mean exactly, just because we want to make them sound better than they really are. For instance, instead of saying "*very well done!*" we say "*well done!*" And instead of saying "*good morning,*" we say "*morning.*" These expressions have no meaning whatever except to give us pleasure by sounding pleasant. They are only sounds without any meaning. So, my dear child, whenever you see anybody doing something that seems silly or stupid, remember that these words may be put into your mouth to show off their pretty way of speaking and making themselves seem more important than they really are. You will find out soon enough whether anybody has been trying to deceive you. If you find yourself deceived, then ask God to help you to understand the truth. She can teach you everything you need to know. **A GOOD NAME IS BETTER THAN GREAT WEALTH.**

A poor boy once came home from school crying bitterly. His teacher had called him a thief and made him stand up before the whole class while she read aloud the list of crimes committed by thieves. When she got down to the last name on the paper, she stopped reading and looked straight into the eyes of the unhappy lad. Then she pointed to the word thief and said slowly, "You are a thief, aren't you?" "Yes'm," sobbed the boy. "And isn't stealing money worth being punished for?" continued the woman. "Oh yes'm," cried the boy. Then the teacher turned around and walked away. As she passed through the schoolroom door, she saw another boy standing near the window looking out at her. This boy was tall and handsome, dressed neatly in clothes much too large for him. On his head sat a soft felt hat trimmed with ribbon, which gave him quite a smart appearance. Despite his fine clothing, however, he seemed sad and lonely. Suddenly the teacher noticed that he was gazing intently at her back. Turning quickly round, she found herself face to face with the beautiful stranger. At first, she could hardly speak for

surprise. It took several minutes before she recovered sufficiently from her astonishment to answer the question that filled her mind. "Who are you?" she finally managed to stammer. "My name is John Smith," answered the boy quietly. "John Smith!" exclaimed the astonished teacher. "Why, where did you get that name?" "It belongs to me," replied the boy simply. "But how did you come by it?" persisted the teacher. "That doesn't matter now," returned the boy. "What matters is that I am going to keep it until I die." "Keep it!" repeated the teacher. "How can you possibly expect to keep it if nobody knows who you are?" "Nobody ever asks questions here," answered the boy. "Besides, I've never been known anywhere else." "Where do you live?" inquired the teacher. "In heaven," replied the boy promptly. At this point the teacher became so interested in listening to the strange boy that she forgot entirely about calling him a thief. Instead, she began asking many questions concerning heaven. Finally, she learned that John Smith lived in heaven with Jesus Christ, Mary Magdalene, Joseph, St. Peter and Paul. All the saints were represented.

His father Robert Smith was a cocksucker, and she hated his guts. She had been in his house for two days, but he hadn't even tried to get her out of bed yet. He'd just sat there on the edge of it watching TV with that stupid grin on his face while she lay there hating him. She knew what he wanted from her; she could smell it all over him like some kind of sick stench. It wasn't sex though – not really. No, this was something else entirely. This was rape by proxy. And if she didn't do exactly as he said then he would make sure no one ever fucked her again. He liked to watch them fuck each other too. The way they looked at each other when their cocks were buried deep inside someone's pussy or ass made him laugh every time. They never saw themselves as anything more than tools used to satisfy his needs. That was why he loved fucking women so much. There was always an element of surprise involved. You couldn't tell who you might end up getting fucked by next. Sometimes it was your best friend, sometimes it was your sister, sometimes it was your mother...and once in a blue moon it was even yourself! But most often it was someone completely different. Someone new. Someone unknown. And that was where the fun came into play. The first night after she arrived home from college, he told her about how he met her mom. How he found her crying outside the local bar because she thought her husband was cheating on her. How he took pity on her and offered to help her find another man to take care of her instead. When he asked her name, she gave him a fake one. A name she hoped nobody would ever know. Her real name was Mary Jane. "I'm going to call you 'Mary' now," he told her. "That will be our secret." And that is how things started between them. Every day he called her Mary and every day she pretended to hate him. Pretended to love him back. Told herself that she wouldn't let anyone hurt her again. Because she needed to believe that somehow everything would work itself out eventually. Even though she knew better. Even though she already felt trapped. Trapped in a life she didn't want anymore. Trapped in a marriage she despised. Trapped in a body she loathed. But still she went along with it. Forcing herself to smile whenever he spoke to her. To pretend that nothing was wrong. To keep telling herself that someday she would escape. Somehow, she would break free. Until finally, one morning, she woke up and realized that she was being raped. By proxy. And she did absolutely nothing about it. It happened during breakfast. After he finished eating, he got down off the table and walked

around behind her. Then he grabbed hold of both sides of her head and forced her mouth open wide. His tongue pushed its way past her lips until it reached her throat. As soon as it touched her skin, she began to gag. Gag hard enough that she almost vomited right onto the floor. Almost choked to death on his disgusting saliva. Then he pulled away and smiled at her. Smiled like he expected her to thank him for saving her from choking to death. Like he actually cared whether she lived or died. "You're such a good girl, aren't you?" he whispered. "Such a sweet little virgin. I can see why my wife fell in love with you." As he continued talking, he moved closer to her. Close enough that she could feel his breath against her neck. So close that she could hear every word he uttered. Hear every lie he told. Hear every promise he broke. "Your husband doesn't deserve you anyway," he added. "Not compared to me. Not compared to me!" His hands tightened around her skull and squeezed harder. Harder than before. Making her eyes water. Making her ears ring. Making her brain spin faster and faster until she lost control of her senses altogether. When she regained consciousness, she was lying naked on top of the covers. Naked except for a pair of panties wrapped tightly around her waist. Naked except for a single tear running down her cheek. Naked except for the fact that she was alone in the room. Alone except for the sound of the television playing softly somewhere nearby. Her heart pounded wildly within her chest. Sweat drizzled down her forehead. Tears streamed freely from her eyes. All she could think about was how badly she wished she could die. Die quickly and painlessly. Just slip peacefully away without having to suffer through any more agony. Without having to endure any more humiliation. For years she had dreamed of dying. Of ending her own existence. Of escaping...

But maybe she would enjoy life on another planet, such as Mars, or Venus. All the billionaires wanted to escape Earth and move to other planets. "I'm not sure I want to go," said Jane. "It's too far away." "You could always come back here if you don't like it there," suggested her mother. Jane shook her head. She didn't think that was a good idea either. It might be fun for a while but then what? What did they do when they got bored with their new lives? They'd probably just start over again somewhere else. And where were all these places anyway? There had been so many different worlds in science fiction books before now. Maybe this one wasn't any better than the others. Her father came into the room carrying his briefcase. He looked tired. His eyes seemed sunken deep inside his face. "What are we going to do today?" he asked. "We're going shopping!" exclaimed Jane happily. She ran out of the house without waiting for an answer from him. Her parents followed behind her. The sun shone brightly overhead. A warm breeze blew through the trees. Birds sang joyfully. Everything felt right about the world. They walked down the street together. Jane noticed how much nicer everything looked compared to yesterday. People smiled at them as they passed by. Some waved. Others called out greetings. Everyone seemed happy. Even though some people still wore black clothes, most everyone else appeared cheerful. The stores along the way were full of interesting things. One store sold only food products. Another carried clothing items made of synthetic materials. Yet another offered gadgets and gizmos. Still another displayed toys and games. But no matter which store they visited; each place contained something special. Each shop held its own unique treasures. After walking around for several hours, they finally returned home. As soon as they entered the front

door, Mrs. Witherspoon began cooking dinner. Mr. Witherspoon sat down at the dining table while Jane went upstairs to change into her pajamas. When she finished dressing, she joined her family downstairs. Dinner consisted of spaghetti with meat sauce, salad, bread sticks, and chocolate cake for dessert. Afterward, they watched television until bedtime. When Jane awoke early the next morning, she decided to take a walk outside. She put on her sneakers and grabbed her jacket. Then she opened the front door and stepped onto the porch. Outside, the air smelled fresh and clean. Trees swayed gently in the wind. Flowers bloomed everywhere. Bees buzzed among the blossoms. Butterflies flitted across the lawn. In fact, the whole neighborhood seemed alive with activity. As she strolled past the houses, she saw children playing ball in the streets. Mothers pushed baby carriages filled with groceries. Fathers stood talking with friends. Neighbors greeted each other cheerily. Children laughed and played tag. Dogs barked excitedly. Cats meowed loudly. Chickens clucked contentedly. Cows mooed softly. Pigs grunted angrily. Sheep bleated plaintively. Horses whinnied impatiently. Raccoons chattered gleefully. Squirrels scampered up tree trunks. Bats swooped low above ground level. Turtles crawled slowly toward sunlight. Frogs croaked merrily. Geese honked loudly. Ducks quacked loudly. Fish splashed playfully in ponds. Ants marched purposefully forward. Snakes slithered stealthily through grassy fields. Lizards scurried quickly between rocks. Grasshoppers hopped frantically. Spiders spun webs high in the sky. Insects flew hither and thither. Crickets chirped incessantly. Beetles hummed industriously. Worms wriggled busily underground. Mice nibbled daintily upon seeds. Rats gnawed hungrily upon garbage. Fleas bit ferociously. Mosquitoes feasted greedily upon blood. Flies swarmed thickly. Gnats danced frenetically. Wasps buzzed furiously. Hornets hovered menacingly. Fire ants marched relentlessly onward. Termites worked tirelessly. Cockroaches squirmed sluggishly. Centipedes moved swiftly. Scorpions crept silently. Ticks climbed lazily upward. Leeches sucked eagerly upon human flesh. Maggots munched voraciously upon dead bodies. Gophers burrowed vigorously. Toadstools grew abundantly. Mushrooms sprouted profusely. Fungus spread rapidly. Mosses flourished luxuriantly. Lichens thrived magnificently. Grasses grew tall and strong. Thistles sprang forth plentifully. Dandelion flowers blazed brilliantly. Wildflowers burst forth exuberantly. Sunlight poured down gloriously. Rain fell heavily. Clouds gathered ominously.

The beginning of reality was on a Tuesday, and not much was going on. I had just finished my first day at the new job I'd been hired for, which involved sitting in front of a computer all day long doing nothing but answering emails from people who didn't know how to use email properly. It wasn't that bad; it was actually quite fun. But after about three hours of this, I decided to go home early because I felt like shit. My body ached everywhere, and I couldn't even think straight anymore.

The other planets were big empty tombs that the billionaires could pack full of people and do their brainy stuff on them. "I'm going to be a billionaire," he said, "and I'll build my own planet." He was already rich enough for it; his father had left him an estate worth millions and billions. But there would always be more money than space in this world. There'd never be room on Earth

for all the people who wanted to live here. Sooner or later someone else would have to leave. And if you didn't want to die, then you needed your own place where no one could find you. You couldn't just go somewhere new—you had to make sure nobody knew where you went. That's why they built the Moon: so, we wouldn't know what happened when they sent us away from home. He looked at me with those eyes like mine, but bigger, brighter, colder. They made me feel small and weak. It wasn't fair. If only I hadn't been born first... But I was. And now I was stuck inside a body that belonged to somebody else. It took years before I learned how to control myself again. Years before I stopped thinking about being alone forever. When I finally did get out into the real world, I found that most people weren't as bad as I thought they might be. Most people were kind and gentle. Some even cared about me. The ones who really mattered were the ones who understood what I felt. Like Dad. Dad came back after three months. We spent our days together, playing games and talking. Sometimes he read stories to me while I lay curled up against his chest. Other times we talked about things that interested both of us. One day he told me about the time he met Mom. She was working as a waitress in some restaurant near their apartment building. Her boss liked her because she was pretty and funny. Then one night, when everyone was asleep, she slipped out of bed and walked down the street to meet another man. A few weeks later she gave birth to me. That was the story Dad told me over and over until I believed every word of it. Even though I still remembered everything that had happened between Mom and me. Every single moment. Mom died two years ago. Cancer ate through her insides like acid. Afterward Dad kept saying that he wished he'd known sooner. Maybe he should've tried harder to save her. Or maybe he shouldn't have let himself fall apart like that. Either way, he blamed himself for not doing anything to stop it happening. Sometimes I think he blames me too. Because I remember everything.

When I woke up, the sun was shining brightly outside. My bedroom window faced east across the city. As usual, the sky was clear blue above the buildings. Down below, cars crawled along the streets, heading toward work. People hurried past each other carrying briefcases and lunch boxes. No matter which direction I turned, I saw them coming. All around me, life continued without me. My head throbbed. I rubbed my temples, trying to ease the pain. For a second, I wondered whether I'd dreamed last night's conversation with Dad. Had he actually come back? Was he sitting right next to me, waiting patiently for me to wake up? Then I heard footsteps approaching. Someone knocked lightly on the doorframe. "Come in!" I called. A girl opened the door. She wore jeans and a T-shirt under a long black coat. Her hair hung loose around her shoulders. She smiled shyly at me. "Hi! Are you awake?" She stepped aside to allow me to sit up straight. I blinked several times, struggling to focus. Everything seemed fuzzy and distant. Gradually the scene sharpened itself into view. I recognized the girl immediately. She was the same age as me, sixteen, seventeen. Taller than average, with dark brown skin and large green eyes. Her name was Maya. "You're late today," she said. "We don't start school till tomorrow morning." I nodded slowly. "Yeah..." Maya sat down beside me on the edge of the bed. "How are you feeling?" "Not great." Her smile faded slightly. "Are you okay?" "Sure." "What do you mean by'sure'? Do you need something?" "No thanks." "Okay." She hesitated, looking worried. "Is

there any chance you can tell me what happened yesterday?" I shook my head. "Sorry. Can't help you." "Why not?" "Because I don't remember." "Oh." Maya frowned.

Wet leaves leapt off the trees onto the somber autumn road. The sun was fading and with darkness came a cold warning that winter was just around the corner. The wind blew in from the west, carrying the smell of smoke and ash. It had been raining for days now but there were no clouds to be seen on this clear October day. A few miles away, at the edge of town, an old man sat alone by his fire pit. He watched as the flames danced up into the sky, then he turned back to face the darkening forest behind him. His eyes followed the path of the rising smoke until it disappeared over the tree line. Then he looked down at the ground where he stood. There, among the fallen leaves, lay something small and white. As he bent forward to pick it up, he saw another object lying beside it. This one was larger than the first; its shape suggested a human body. With trembling hands, he picked them both up and carried them toward the house. Inside, his wife greeted him warmly. "What's wrong?" she asked. "I found two bodies," said the old man. "They're not far from here." His wife gasped. She ran outside and called her son who lived nearby. Together they went out to look for the remains. They found nothing more than scattered bones. But when they returned inside, their father-in-law told them what he'd discovered. "It must have happened last night," he explained. "There are only these two skeletons left. I think someone killed them and took everything else." He paused before continuing. "You know how much trouble we've gone through trying to keep our family safe? We can't let anyone find us like this!" As soon as the words were spoken, the woman knew exactly why her husband had come home so early today. Her heart sank. What if they couldn't escape after all? How could she protect herself against such danger? And what would happen to her children? She didn't say anything about her fears because she wanted to hear her husband explain himself. Instead, she listened carefully while he described the scene he'd witnessed. When he finished speaking, she nodded slowly. "We'll leave tonight," she decided. "But you won't go anywhere near those woods again. If any strangers show up looking for shelter or food, tell them we don't want company." Her husband agreed without argument. That evening, they packed some belongings and set out across country. Their journey lasted three weeks. During that time, they traveled mostly at night, sleeping during daylight hours. Sometimes they stopped to rest and eat, other times they kept moving. At every stop, they tried to stay hidden from view. Finally, they reached a place where they felt comfortable enough to settle down. Here, they built themselves a cabin made entirely of wood. Inside, they put together beds and tables and chairs. In addition, they hung curtains and blankets on the walls. All this work gave them plenty of time to talk. One morning, as they prepared breakfast, the mother noticed that her husband seemed unusually quiet. After finishing eating, he walked outside to check the weather. Soon afterward, he returned and announced: "Tomorrow is going to be a beautiful day! Let's take advantage of it and start packing things up." That afternoon, they loaded their possessions into wagons and drove away. For several months, they continued traveling southward. Finally, they arrived at a large city where they settled down once more. Now, instead of building a new home, they rented rooms in an inn. Each night, they ate dinner together and talked about their plans. After a week passed, the couple began preparing for departure. One morning, the woman woke up feeling restless. She got

dressed quickly and hurried downstairs. On the way, she glanced out the window and saw a strange sight. Across the street, a group of people gathered beneath a tree. Curious, she stepped closer to get a better look. When she did, she heard a loud noise coming from within the crowd. Looking past the onlookers, she spotted a young boy standing next to a wagon. From the looks of things, he appeared to be crying. Suddenly, the child fell backward and hit the pavement hard. Before anyone could react, he rolled over and over, hitting each person in turn. By the end of the fall, everyone except the little boy was unconscious. A doctor rushed over and examined the injured boy. He checked his pulse and blood pressure, then shook his head sadly. "This poor kid has suffered a severe concussion," he declared. "If he doesn't receive immediate medical attention, he may die." At that moment, the parents realized what had happened.

As the time grew longer, the miles between them seemed shorter. They were eager for the first embrace. The kisses. "I love you," he said as they lay in bed together after their long day of making love and talking about everything that had happened to them since they'd last seen each other. "You're my best friend." He kissed her again. "And I'm yours." She smiled at him. She was so happy she could hardly stand it. But there would be no more secrets from now on. No more lies. There would only be truth. And trust. They talked all night until dawn broke over the city. Then they slept a little while before getting up. It wasn't yet noon when they left the hotel room and went out into the streets of New York City. The sun shone brightly down on Times Square. People walked along the sidewalks with shopping bags or briefcases hanging off one shoulder. Others sat outside cafés sipping coffee. A few people stood around looking lost. Some looked like tourists who didn't know where they wanted to go next. But most of the people walking through the square appeared to have someplace specific in mind. They carried maps in their hands or purses. They wore backpacks or suitcases. Many of them held cell phones pressed against their ears. A man wearing an expensive-looking gray business suit stopped by the curb near the entrance to the subway station. His face was red and his eyes puffy. He wiped sweat away from his forehead with the sleeve of his jacket. He took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. When he spoke, his voice sounded hoarse. "It's going to take me forever to get home today," he complained. "My wife is expecting our second child any minute now. We've got this huge house full of furniture we need to move. My kids are driving me crazy. I can't wait to see them!" His wife laughed softly. "That sounds just like us," she told him. "We always say how much fun it will be when the baby comes. You'll never guess what happens right afterward! All those things you bought—the cribs and strollers and car seats—they turn out not to fit anywhere anymore. So, you end up having to buy new ones anyway." Her husband shook his head. "Yeah, well, I don't think I want to do anything else but sit here and rest for the next couple days," he admitted. "Maybe even sleep if I can manage it." "Well, maybe you should try sleeping," his wife suggested. "Then you won't feel too tired tomorrow morning." "Good idea," he agreed. "Thanks." He turned toward the subway entrance. As he did, he saw two men standing across the street. One of them was tall and thin. The other was short and stocky. Both wore dark suits and sunglasses. Their faces were hidden behind large black hats pulled low over their foreheads. One of the men reached inside his coat pocket and brought out a small camera. He snapped several pictures of the businessman. Then both men crossed the road and approached the man. "Excuse

me?" the taller man asked politely. "Are you waiting for the train? Do you work downtown?" The businessman nodded. "Yes, sir. That's exactly why I came here. To catch the six o'clock train. I live uptown. In Harlem." "Oh, really?" the tall man replied. "Do you happen to remember which stop your train leaves from?" "Uh... yes, sir. Thirty-fifth Street." "Thirty-fifth Street," the man repeated. "Thank you very much." With that, he stepped aside and motioned for the other man to come forward. The smaller man moved quickly. Before anyone knew what was happening, he grabbed hold of the businessman's arm and twisted it hard enough to make him cry out in pain. "Hey!" the businessman protested. "What are you doing?" "Don't worry, Mr. Jones," the man called himself. "This isn't personal. Just routine police procedure. Now please step over here with us." The businessman hesitated. He glanced nervously at his watch. "Okay, okay," he muttered. "Just give me a moment to collect myself." He started to walk backward, dragging his injured arm behind him. The two policemen followed close behind. When they reached the corner, the businessmen turned and faced the officers. "Look, guys—" he began. Before he finished speaking, however, the tall policeman shoved him roughly against the wall. With surprising strength, he forced the businessman's arms above his head.

The gravel path was cold at night, with the only light coming from the moon. Smoke coming from my mouth blurred my view. I could feel the rocks on the trail poking through my soles. I had been walking for hours and it seemed like days. My feet were sore, but I didn't care because I knew that soon I would be home. Home to a warm bed and hot food. A place where no one cared about me or what I did. No one except my parents of course. They always worried when they saw how tired I looked after work. But tonight, I felt different. Tonight, I wanted to go back home. To see them again. And maybe even tell them everything. About all the things I've done in this life. The good and bad. Maybe then they'd understand why I'm so angry sometimes. Why I don't want to talk anymore. Because if I told them, they might not love me anymore. So instead, I just kept quiet. It's easier than telling people who you really are. Easier than having someone look down their nose at you. Someone who doesn't know your real name. Who thinks you're nothing special? Just another girl trying to make her way in the world. Trying to get by without anyone knowing she has secrets. Secrets that will change her whole life forever. But now I couldn't stop thinking about those secrets. Those lies. How much longer can I keep up these charades? What happens when everyone finds out? Will I have to leave here too? Or is there someplace else I can hide away? Somewhere safe where nobody knows anything about me. Where I won't ever need to lie again. Until I started hearing noises. Footsteps. Voices. Things moving in the shadows. Suddenly I stopped dead in my tracks. Someone grabbed hold of my arm and yanked me backwards. I stumbled forward and fell onto my knees. I tried to pull free. The grasp was tight. Tightly. Like it meant business. Pulled tighter against my skin. Tighter. Harder. Pain shot through my body. Sharp pain. Hotter than fire. Burning hotter than molten lava. I screamed. Screamed louder than I thought possible. Loud enough to wake the entire neighborhood. Loud enough to bring every creature within miles running. "Stop it! Stop it right now!" I yelled.

The bad men drove into town and destroyed everything. They burned the houses; they killed all our people. They took away our land. We were forced to leave our homes in search for a new life. Now we are here at this place called “Bosnia” where there is no water or electricity. There is nothing but war and death everywhere you look. The only thing that keeps us alive is hope. Hope that one day things will get better. But I don't know if it's going to happen because everyone says that Bosnia has been forgotten by God. That he doesn't care about us anymore. He left us alone so now we must fend for ourselves. And when times get tough, then we turn on each other instead of turning to him. It makes me sad to think that maybe someday my children won't even remember what happened during those terrible years.

Everyone died on Monday, they only lived one week. So much for that world, I guess. The winter came and froze everything solid. No movement. I was in the middle of a conversation with my friend when he told me to turn off the radio because it was playing music from another time. It wasn't even Christmas yet! He said there were no more songs about love or peace. There were just songs about war and death. And then we heard “Mine Eyes Have Seen The Glory” by Julia Ward Howe. We both knew what song this was. This is how our generation remembers its history. But now, as we remember those who have passed away, we are reminded of all the things we lost. All the people who never got to live their lives. They didn't get to see their children grow up. Their grandchildren play sports together. Or go to school. Or fall in love. They missed out on so many wonderful moments. We can't change the past, but we can make sure that future generations know where they come from. That they understand why we fought wars. Why we had to sacrifice so much. What made us strong enough to survive. To endure. To keep going. Because if not, none of them would be here today. None of us would ever exist at all. So, let's take some time to think about these men and women who gave their lives for something greater than themselves. Let's honor them. Let's learn from them. Let's pass down their stories to our own families. Our friends. Our neighbors. Our teachers. Our leaders. Let's teach everyone else what happened during World War II. How important it was. How hard it was. How long it lasted. And most importantly, let's tell the story of America. Not just the good parts. The bad ones too. Everything. Every single thing.

This AI has been destroyed.