

Epiphora

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

Madhalasa Iyer, Grade 10, Liberty High School, Frisco, TX.

Pernie Fallon, *Educator*; Region-at-Large, *Affiliate*.

Gold Medal, **New York Life Award**

8:00 p.m. (“Beaming” hour)

Jaden props up his elbows, brushes his brown bangs from his forehead, and gazes at the night sky.

“Aren’t the stars so pretty?” he asks, his big blue eyes completely mesmerized.

“Yes, they are pretty. But they aren’t stars,” I reply.

Jaden turns to face me, perplexed.

“They are makeshift guards, protecting us.”

Jaden rolled his eyes. “Whatever. They are pretty though.”

I smile. I see mother in him.

Mother.

The thought brings thousands of flashing memories. The piercing screams. Mother’s tear-filled cheeks. Her flailing hands reaching out to me. The merciless ironclad officials dragging her out of our house and our lives forever.

I blinked forcibly, stopping the tears about to drip from my eyes. I can’t cry.

I’m not allowed to.

I lift Jaden up, holding his hand as we walk back into the house.

On the sofa, Papa sits, reading a newspaper with a fake smile on his face.

He looks up and greets us with “Hey kiddos!”

We nod back and Jaden walks into his room as I sit next to my father to peek at the headlines.

As usual, the Happy News segment has covered the entire editorial page. The same signs to show the perfect society and non-oppressive government that we were currently blessed with. The news that makes us feel that going back into the previous eras would ruin our balance of society.

We once heard that in the prehistoric times there were methods by which a person could communicate with someone on the other side of the world. Of course, both history and that kind of innovation would be strictly prohibited.

You see, it’s quite simple. Technological innovations and communications are supposed to be limited, so news of death doesn’t spread easily. Knowledge of the death of one’s kith and kin would be matters invoking serious displeasure and desolation. That kind of despair and misery had no place in the happy society that we were living in.

In simple words, crying is inexcusable.

The TP Government officials outlined it in their rule book of democracy and pursuit of happiness.

“To ensure the equality, justice, and exaltation of our citizens, crying and any form or method that invokes tears are prohibited. Crying is a method of manipulation that neither benefits the person who is doing it nor the one who is receiving it. The lenses embedded in the citizens’ eyes warn and inform the Tear-Prohibition government officials. They will receive treatment and necessary procedures to better their characteristics.”

Dad flipped the newspaper back to the front page.

The headlines read “OCCUPATION DAY TOMORROW” in big black bold letters with a yellow smiley face.

The inevitable Occupation Day.

My breath hitched, and pure cortisol released through my body. This yearly tradition scares all the 17-year-olds.

We used to have people pick their jobs. This eventually led them to regret their decision and cry about salary, workload, and boss troubles. So, the government made much required reforms.

We don’t get the choice, and all the jobs are considered equally challenging and rewarding. Though the government says that, the people in the community all believe that becoming a TP official is the best job to earn. I, quite strongly, disagree with them.

On the sidelines of the newspaper, sales for discounted OG were posted from multiple markets.

Our Onion-Goggles prevent our lachrymal glands from crying while we chop onions. Below the OG ads, the licensed eye doctors gave options for supplements and treatments for watery eyes.

The full newspaper held pictures of a group of smiling people, jokes to lighten up the day, and all the news that was irrelevant to the obstruction of free will. Of course, that I'm not allowed to mention.

Mother told me that all of them, including Father and probably Jaden, have their minds so wired into this society that they believe it could do nothing wrong. She told me I've got to think differently.

"Don't mention, just believe."

But then again, she also told me she'd return. I don't know what to believe.

My broken thoughts are interrupted by sudden fireworks. Jaden rushes out of his room and looks out the window in the hall.

"It's the funeral band!" he yells.

Jaden is always excited about the funeral bands.

The music works as an external rhythm to the heart. Every drumbeat reverberates through the soul. If only the drumbeats could revive the dead. That would make it true heartbeats.

We were told that there was a time when people wore black to a funeral and buried the person underground.

I can't imagine mourning death. The TP officials say that the people who pass on didn't really care about the ones left behind, and we should celebrate that they are much happier where they are.

But there are these thoughts in my brain that make me wonder about certain things that could surely put me in prison.

Like, what if the people who died didn't want to die?

"Don't mention, just believe."

Right.

I walked out to see the marching funeral band procession, quite a regularity these days, but it had brought all our neighbors out onto their lawns. The drum band was marching out in the front line, leading the family and the other relatives who joined. They all carried banners with the name "CHRISTINA" and had radiant smiles on their

faces. They chanted "Christina, Happy Death Day!!" and all the neighbors cheered along to the crowd. If we didn't know better, we would have thought that they were singing Christmas carols.

"Come back in, Jaden. It's late," I remarked, tapping on his shoulders.

When he didn't oblige, I lifted him up, my arms using his armpits as an anchor, and carried him back in. When I fell asleep that night, it wasn't my mother's visions, the same drumbeats, or the guarding stars in the skies that kept me dreaming.

It was the prospect of tomorrow.

Tomorrow.

10:00 a.m. ("Ecstatic" hour)

The next day, we all stood in the auditorium as people lined in.

Representatives from the job industries waited in the front of the room for their recruits. One by one, I saw my friends walk to the front and pick up the tiny sheets of paper on the desk.

Lucy—eye specialist. A terrific option. She wanted to be TP, but seeing the smile on her face, I'm sure she was more than happy. Now that I'm thinking about it, she was always worried about how many carrots she ate.

Chris—drum marcher. I kind of guessed it already. His skills in the band at school were phenomenal.

Teacher, singer, newspaper editor, and many other professions were filling up. As each person went up, I slowly imagined what it would be like if I were picked for these occupations.

I realized that I didn't have to imagine any longer. As the governor motioned me forward, I saw the envelope with my name on it.

I rubbed my sweaty hands on my jeans and smiled at the governor. I grabbed the letter and opened the seal.

My breath caught in my throat. I almost quit blinking. Realizing that this might cause tears in my eyes, I tightly shut my eyes before reading out my profession.

With a fake smile plastered on my face, I grabbed the mike from the governor.

“Tear-Prohibition official,” I read in my strongest voice.

I heard loud cheers from the audience, and all the other recruits from other jobs stood up to salute. With my shaking hands, I saluted back. I saw the proud smile of my dad and the ecstatic face of my five-year-old brother. I forced manners into my unheeding lips and smiled back at them.

1:00 p.m. (“Euphoric” hour)

After all the other people had finished their job “decisions,” the TP officials gave us instructions. We were to receive a private guide, and each one of us were appointed to different sections (to limit hostility and competition).

As I leaned on one side wall, an official clad in a burgundy uniform strode up to me.

“I’m Jack,” the officer said, looking straight into my eyes.

“May.” I responded.

Jack nodded and began walking out of the auditorium. I diligently followed.

“We have little time, so we will get started right away. I’ll take you on a tour of our building. It has three compounds. The first is the detection and alert system. The second is the deployment of our troops. The third is our extremely protected and well-guarded reform location.”

“You mean the prison system?” I clarified.

Jack turned to face me; his eyebrows crunched.

“We prefer the term reform system. We are bettering the individuals. Which I’m sure you are aware of. In fact, you are supposed to be employed at the reform center.”

I looked up at him, unsure of what to say. A million thoughts clouded my mind.

Mother.

Would I see my mother? What would I say? Can I bring her back?

Jack coughed to clear his throat.

“We will allow you to walk through the prison at your own leisure with the entire trust that you of course would not use the methods of manipulation.”

I nodded.

“Wonderful. Let’s begin.”

After an extensive tour of the first two compounds, Jack led me into the prison—sorry—reform structure.

“Since only one person is allowed in at a time, I’ll let you go in. It’s just one circular hallway so you shouldn’t get lost, but if you do, ask any of the janitors.”

Jack slowly used his ID and plugged in the code. The numbers 00770 made unique music, soft to my ears.

The metal protected gate opened, and a narrow walkway led me into the hall.

To be entirely honest, the compound looked nothing like how I imagined it to be. The grey monotonous walls in my expectations were transformed into colorful rainbow prisms.

The ceiling was open, showing the skies with dotted stars.

I looked up. The stars. How pretty.

Mom would have liked this place if it weren’t funded by the government.

I heard sounds of laughter from the nearby rooms. The rooms were circular, so one could see all the patients by standing in the center. Each room had an open glass window so that everyone could see the huge “NOTIFICATION” board and the open skies.

Currently, news of Occupation Day filled the entire corkboard.

Next to the board were markers for the patients and the TP officials to communicate. I know I wasn’t supposed to communicate with anyone, but something tempted me. I wanted to find Mother.

To be entirely honest, I didn’t know how to.

I looked at the patients in all the rooms. Some had almost entirely reformed, with nothing but a smile on their face. Others had gone wrinkled and old, most probably because they never learned.

I wondered if Mom had reformed.

Or did she already die?

The thought didn’t let me move away from the board. I hesitantly grabbed the marker and wrote.

“DON’T MENTION, JUST _____”

I exhaled. If Mother was here, she would finish it. I heard slow whispers between confused people in the rooms. I waited, not knowing what to expect.

I moved away from the board to a corner to see if anyone would finish it.

Within a couple of minutes, I heard the slow creak of a doorknob. An old fragile lady, who looked at the brink of her death, walked over to the board.

Her grey hair outlined the edges of her face. Her eyes were crinkled and small. I could see that her tears had caused her to age so tremendously. Another act of crying could likely kill her.

She slowly touched the letters. Grabbing the markers nearby, she wrote the letters "BELIEVE."

My heart stopped beating. I dragged my feet to the center of the room. The old lady slowly turned and as soon as she looked at me, the corners of her lips turned up.

"Mother?"

"May—" she mouthed before collapsing onto the floor.

Amid shock and momentary paralysis, I heard the tune of the drum marchers. The rhythm reverberating. Much like a heartbeat.

The banners from her room were taken, as if they were expecting her to die soon. The TP officials walked inside to take her body.

My mother. Her flailing arms. Her piercing scream. Her last words. The frosty night skies. The millions of protective stars.

And then, an inexcusable thing happened.

A tear slowly escaped down my cheek. ■