

Nublius: A Day in Sans

by Elliot R Ronen

The sounds of early morning shuddered through Illem's head as he groggily descended the stairs; a toaster jumped, eggs popped and snapped in the pan, small footsteps ran across the kitchen floor, his mother hummed to herself as she worked. A reporter spoke with grave intensity on a small TV.

"...differing stories from witnesses to last night's attack, but one thing is clear: the misuse of Will can have devastating effects. Politicians today called for tighter Will restriction laws, while traditional proponents, such as the Sans-based chapter of Will to Live, reiterated the need for better Will education in our schools, issuing a statement to the Sans Observer this morning."

"Good morning, sleepy-Lem," Tashe sang with a happy tune to Illem as he entered the kitchen. She picked up the TV remote, muted the news report and pushed two eggs onto a plate with a piece of bread, making sure to leave nothing behind. "Come get your breakfast."

Illem rubbed his half closed eyes. The heavy plate warmed his hands and he carried it over to the kitchen table. Mern munched on a piece of toast, his eggs already gone, dangling his feet from the chair energetically.

"Sleepy-Lem," Mern parroted their mother. Illem stuck out his tongue at his brother in reply.

"You guys all ready for school?" their mother asked, placing the pans in the sink.

"Yes, mom," the brothers recited together, Mern in a bubbly tone and Illem in a flat one.

"Good! Mern, go get your stuff together while Lem eats his breakfast." One by one, Tashe put away everything into its proper place, leaving nothing but the TV remote on the kitchen counter. Her lively tone dropped slightly when she finally looked at Illem, chipping away at his eggs sullenly. "Illem! Did you comb your hair this morning?"

The fork had been the first thing Illem held in his hand after rolling out of bed and pulling a long pair of underwear

over his legs, wrapping the loops at the bottom around his feet. His hair gave his laziness away: its blond waves, which usually came down around his ears, flared and churned in all directions like surf crashing over a rock. "No, mom."

"Well make sure you do before you leave this house. Can't have you looking like that all day at school!" Her singing tone always resonated off Mern. The younger child giggled at his solemn older brother before turning and hopping down off his chair. With a morning energy that Illem couldn't fathom, Mern bounded from the room to brush his teeth and gather his things.

His mother hummed lightly to herself, wiping down the granite kitchen counter with a wet towel. On the television, the reporter continued to motion at the scene behind her, mouthing silently. The snowy city street was full of wrecked cars and upturned snow. In the distance, a police barrier blocked any traffic from the street, by car or foot.

The snow itself was an event worth reporting on to Illem. Though Sans was accustomed to flurries of snow during the winter, the normally warm beach city never harbored it on the ground for long. The fact that over a foot of it coated the ground had left much of the unprepared city stranded. The snow still fell outside the kitchen window, like static on the world.

Along the bottom of the television, school names scrolled past slowly, announcing closings. As mystified by the snow as he was, Illem ignored the scrolling names, accepting the truth that his suburban town, wealthy and wasteful, kept a supply of plows and salt just for such an occasion. Most schools inside the city limits of Sans had been closed for the last three days, but his school and its neighbors had yet to close.

Tashe dried the clean counters. She always told her sons that she treated the morning chores like a game she couldn't lose, humming along her themes for each task. Finally, she folded up her towel, hung it over the oven handle and began her final tune (washing her hands). Morning game completed, she pulled free of her apron, hung it on a tall cabinet's handle and threw her hands up in victory toward Illem, still chomping away at his eggs. He returned her triumphant gesture with a look from his slotted eyes, dragged down by the heavy bags underneath.

His mother smiled and gave him a kiss on the forehead before ruffling his hair. Her hands smelled softly of lemon. After grabbing a glass mug from a cabinet and a small marble and tea bag from a drawer, she sat down across from Illem at the table and asked how his breakfast was. A weary nod returned his approval.

She laughed warmly and said, "You're just like your father in the morning." Illem didn't understand that. Almost two hours ago his father had eaten the same breakfast, unseen and unheard by both his sons. Even the low hum of his luxury truck in the garage underneath their bedrooms failed to ever stir them in their beds. How could his father, who woke up so early each morning, possibly hate mornings as much as he did? "Since your father will be at your school anyway, he's going to be driving you home and taking you to Will school today. You know where to meet him, right?"

Illem nodded again. As a heat therapist, Tashe's schedule was much more flexible than her husband's, so leaving a half hour open to pick up her children from school was routine. Weeks ago however the school had asked their father to give a presentation to students about his work. Due to the inclement weather, he had agreed to stay until the end of the day to drive the kids into Sans for their secondary schooling in his truck.

"Can you believe the snow outside? I haven't seen a blizzard like this since your father and I were your age." Tashe took the marble from the table. It had a flat light grey sheen and it made a heavy clink as she dropped it into the empty mug. Illem's eyes lit up, so his mother asked, "Do you want to try?" Illem's nod revealed a hint of being awake now.

Pushing out his chair behind him, he walked around the table. Tashe overturned the mug and the smooth surface of the marble rolled around in her palm. "Careful," she said as she handed it to her son, "don't burn yourself." Illem's pulse quickened. He clutched his hands together, fingers tightly intertwined as he was taught. The round stone wedged snugly between his palms, he rested his knuckles against the mug.

Half of his concentration was on the stone, the other half on preventing his hands from shaking. Slowly and silently, water began to fill the mug from the bottom. No more than a quarter of the mug was full before the water started to bubble. The higher the water rose, the larger and more violent the bubbles were inside, until the water was halfway up the mug and it churned and roiled as if left over a flame and forgotten. Illem yanked his hands away, flinging the stone and sending it rolling across the hard floor. Red welts spread quickly on his palms, pulsing from the heat of the burning stone. Instinctively, Tashe grabbed his arms and led him to the sink, quickly sticking his hands under a stream of cold water from the sink.

Any hint of song had fled her voice. "I thought you were going to be careful."

Illem winced at the cold burn under the sink. "I was, I just..." He looked at his hands sheepishly. "I thought I could do better."

Tashe inspected her son's hands. Painful red had already begun to recede from the bruise, leaving the beginnings of a deep black reminder. "This bruise will fade, but a little more and it could have been permanent. Let this be a lesson to you. What do all your teachers say about the risks of Will?"

"Never Will more than you can stand." Lem looked at his palms and then at his half full mug, still boiling quietly on the table. Tashe sighed, returning to the table.

Illem sat down across from his mother again as she said, "You did pretty well, though. Half a cup. You just need to learn your limits. It got much too hot too quickly, but that comes with practice." He could still feel the heat deep in his palms. He knew he should have stopped a few seconds sooner. Tashe retrieved another marble and mug and set them beside the first. "Once you can fill the whole mug without burning yourself, then you can begin learning to do this." She dropped the marble into the mug and placed her hand over the top. Water quickly rose to fill three quarters of the mug. There it slowed, and bubbles began to stream from the shiny surface of the marble. By the time the mug was almost full, the water had reached a slow,

steady boil, steam twisting and curling off the top. Tashe took the tea bag from the table and placed it into the water. Illem's eyes were completely awake now, comparing his mother's drink to his half full, overheated work.

Tashe bobbed the tea bag up and down. After a moment, she said, "I think it's time that you got ready to school. You'll have plenty of time for Will later, if your hands will permit it." Illem's excitement faded like the steam rising frantically from his half filled mug, but he did as he was told. His mother ruffled his hair once more as he passed her by. "And comb your hair!"

Her own black hair, straight as an arrow, was tied back tightly in a bun. Steam floated over her olive skin, round features on a long face as she sipped her tea. Her dark brown eyes, nearly black, watched the television in silence. The reporter was gone, replaced by two television personalities in a studio speaking to an author dressed all in white, who was holding up his latest book. Spying the time in the corner of the screen, Tashe took one more long sip of her tea before standing and heading down the hall to the stairs. At the bottom, she called up, "It's almost time, boys! Mern! Lem! Do you need any help?"

Frantic footsteps ran in all directions as both boys called back "No!" to their mother. Soon they both ran down the stairs with their school bags, hands sliding down the white hardwood railing, clothes properly layered against the cold. Illem had covered his bruises with a thick pair of mittens. The boys lined up side by side in front of the door and Tashe pulled on a heavy coat as she ran down their pre-school checklist.

"Alright boys," she barked playfully at her sons, "Body! Did you wash your face?"

"Check!" they answered.

"Brush your teeth?"

"Check!"

"Comb your hair?"

Illem yelled extra loud. "Check!"

"Put on clean underwear?"

"Check." Both sons' volume decreased, as if afraid that the neighbors might hear.

"Two layers of clothing?"

"Check!"

"Snow pants?"

"Check!"

"Tie your shoes?"

Mern's hand shot straight up, his laces sprawled in all directions beside his shoes. Tashe kneeled down to assist. "You still need some practice, huh?" She kissed him on the cheek as she rose, and he giggled.

She returned to her list. "Next, mind! Got your homework?"

"Check!"

"All your books and pencils?"

"Check!"

"Backpacks?"

"Check!"

"Lunch money?"

"Check!"

"Then we're off!" The car keys jingled in her hands as she and the children made their way out to the driveway. Each step sank deeper and deeper into the snow. Tashe pressed a button on her remote and her car purred to life under a blanket of white. All three passengers fought to pry their doors open, buffeted by the relentless wind. Lem and Mern settled into the back seat, seat belts snug against their padded layers as their mother brushed snow from the windshield and windows. Finally she climbed into the drivers' seat and backed the car slowly down their windy, windy driveway. The wheels struggled to grip,

rolling over a pile left behind by the plows, but then they were over, into the freshly plowed street and on their way.

The sustained note of tires rolling over a wet road was sustained by a deep cadence pulsing from the windshield wipers, murmurs of voices on the radio dissonance against the meter. Illem peered out the window. Behind the moving lace curtain of snow, frozen trees stood rigid in the wind on huge lawns between the distant houses. Here and there people struggled against the snow, some with shovels, some with brushes, some with salt, but the endless torrent prevailed. Each yard was an untouched expanse of white; any disturbance to the glistening surfaces had been painted over the night before.

Tashe looked up into the rear view mirror, but Illem didn't notice. "Are you boys excited to see your father at school today?"

"Yes!" Mern squealed.

"Yeah," Illem said flatly, never looking away from the flowing serenity out his window.

"I know he's excited about this. He's been planning his speech since the school asked him to come." Tashe's excitement returned.

"Wonderful," Illem replied. The excitement of having his father at school was undermined by the very real threat of death

by mass embarrassment. Illem hoped that the school knew the potential dangers they presented by asking his father to speak to each class about his job. He didn't understand why they asked his father to speak as opposed to Jommy's dad who was a fireman or Laron's dad who performed surgeries to save people's lives all day. What he had was a clear view of the mortal danger this could present to his social life: one wrong word and Illem wouldn't hear the end of it until he and his peers graduated from high school in nine long years. A drop of sweat trickled down the small of his back underneath all his layers at the very thought.

Tashe hummed her driving theme, weaving her head side to side to get a better view through the falling snow. Mern tried to hum along, but frequently fell behind or hit a wrong note, causing him to burst into a fit of giggles. Illem's focus remained on the white yards and he passed the rest of the drive in silence.

Even the school seemed to sag under the weight of the unforgiving white. Each window, normally vibrant with students' creations pasted on the inside, had a growing lip of white that obscured the colorful classrooms within. Large busses unloaded groups of children walking single file toward the school, each a

colorful dotted line on a huge white canvas. When at last they pulled up to the school, both children climbed out.

"Have a good day!" Tashe called. Illem and Mern waved their thick padded arms stiffly, and headed inside.

The heat blasted them in the face as they crossed the threshold. Teachers wandered the halls of the elementary school with arms full of materials, towering amidst herds of students as frantic as they were numerous. Older students led their younger peers, sometimes three, four or five at a time, toward their classrooms. Mern had only pulled off his mittens when Illem took him by the hand and led him down a wide hallway toward the first grade classrooms.

"Do you know what time Dad is visiting your class?" Illem asked, plowing his way through the churning field of students with his brother in tow.

"They said they're going in grade order. We're first, so we're first." Mern giggled at what he'd said.

Illem rolled his eyes. A quick death, then, he thought. Being three years older, Illem would have to wait until late in the day to have his father speak; the thought of his visit looming over his head the entire day only darkened his already gloomy mood.

Without further conversation, they arrived at Mern's classroom. Illem deposited his younger brother with a terse "Bye" and turned back the way he came.

About half of Illem's class had arrived already, milling about, preparing themselves for the day. Students peeled off layers of clothing and hung them in small cubbies at the rear of the room. Laron was back there, kneeling beside his book bag, removing his books and supplies. Jommy was already sitting at his desk in the middle of the class, his thick rimmed glasses magnifying his eyes peering into a book so intently that Illem thought it might burst into flame at any moment. He smiled at the notion as the thought proceeded in his head, Jommy tossing the flaming book up and down while trying very hard to put out the fire and read its contents simultaneously. Barely containing a laugh, Illem passed through the rows of desks to the back of the room.

"Hey," he said to Laron as he dropped his bag and began to remove his outer layers, hanging each in the cubby.

"Hey Lem." Laron held only a notepad of blank drawing paper and a pencil case. "I hear your dad's coming to give a talk today."

It has begun. "Yeah, I guess so." Illem took his notebook out of his bag and motioned to Laron's drawing paper. "Not planning to take any notes today?"

Laron asked, "Do I take notes any day?" There was little arguing with him there: although Laron's father was a surgeon, he felt his naturally deft hand skills were better used for drawing than cutting and he made sure his teachers all knew it. They couldn't talk back to him about it either, Illem envied, because his grades were always perfect. "Although maybe I'll have to take some notes when your dad speaks. What is he talking about, anyway?"

"His job, I guess," Illem shrugged.

"He works with Will, right?"

"Yeah, something to do with it. He works at HydroDen, who knows what he does all day." Illem removed his notebook from his bag, zipped it up and hung it on the hook.

"My parents go to HydroDen all the time," Laron said as both boys made their way back up the rows of desks to their seats. "Neither of them are very good at using Will."

More students poured through the door, the desks slowly becoming populated. Some of those sitting near the windows sidled their desks toward the center of the room to escape the cold. Illem stopped at his desk, next to Jommy still nose deep

in his book. "Lots of people are like that, though. I don't see why they asked my dad to come speak." He wrinkled his nose at the thought. "Did you see the news last night?"

Laron looked down at his books. His normally carefree tone vanished from his speech. "Yeah... I saw it. So did my parents."

The change in tone passed over his head and Illem replied, "What did they say about it?"

Before Laron could answer the bell rang. A flurry of students rushed to their seats and Laron nonchalantly took his at the front of the room. It didn't take a moment for him to adopt his trademark bored look on his face; by the time Mr. Smeuam came flustered into the room, arms full of grade books and teaching materials, Laron had his drawing pen dancing circles around his thumb. Illem quickly flipped his notebook to the proper page for their first lesson, and placed the appropriate textbook on his desk.

"Good morning class," Mr. Smeuam said.

"Good morning Mr. Smeuam," the class chanted.

"Well class, today we've got a little change of schedule. I'm sure you all saw the news last night and this morning... we've had more than a few concerned parents contact the school's administration, so we're going to skip this morning's chemistry lesson and go straight onto math."

A groan rose from the group that was almost drowned out by the delighted hiss of some students saying Yes! under their breath. As if by lever action, Illem's heart plummeted and his hand shot into the air. Mr. Smeuam motioned for him to put it down and continued.

"I'm sure you've all heard that we have a guest speaker today and you all know what it's about. It couldn't have come at a better time. Chemistry lessons won't resume until the school board has an opportunity to discuss the concerns of the parents, which will be this Friday evening."

Illem's hand shot up again. This time, Mr. Smeuam responded. "Yes, Illem?"

"Did parents ask you to stop teaching chemistry?" Illem asked quickly.

"I'm not really allowed to discuss the concerns of the parents who made the request," Mr. Smeuam answered shiftily.

"Then why can't we have our normal lesson?"

"Maybe you should ask your father when he's talking to the class, okay? For now, let's open our math books to where we left off yesterday, at page-" His command was cut short by Jommy's hand in the air. He smoothed the sharp edge of his voice by running his hand through his hair, a tangled brown dome atop his head. "Yes, Jommy?"

His voice was soft and slow, as if it had been swallowed up by the pages he always had so near to his face. "Is this just our class, or the whole school?"

"Chemistry lessons have been postponed for every class," Mr. Smeuam answered pointedly.

"But what if we want to learn chemistry?"

The red in Mr. Smeuam's face deepened as he tried to suppress his stress level. "I'm not too happy about it either, Jommy, but this is what the administration says. We have to wait for the school board to convene and decide."

Jommy seemed to process for a moment and it looked like he was going to ask another question. Voices all around started to raise into a soft murmur. As if defeated, Jommy looked back down at his desk and pulled out his math book. Mr. Smeuam took control of the noise level with a barked command, and the day's math lesson began.

The subjects crawled by, math into social studies into spatial sciences, Illem unable or unwilling to pay much attention. More than once throughout the morning he looked longingly at Laron halfheartedly scribbling away at his drawing pad. Laron was the kind of friend you couldn't help but think was your friend out of pity: perfect student, amazing artist and, perhaps most importantly of all, popular. Too far away to

see what he was drawing, Illem watched as his pen slid across the paper, its wielder no doubt a million miles away from this lesson, where Illem wished to be.

"How about you, Illem?" Mr. Smeuam called, sending his heart racing. His obvious disinterest was a neon sign on his face. Illem stammered for a reply, but not before Mr. Smeuam continued, "I didn't think so. Would you like me to repeat the question?"

Illem's heart thumped heavily in his ears. "Yes, please."

"If it's the middle of February here," he pointed to a northern continent on a large globe, "then what season is it here?" His hand moved down almost all the way to the south and he pointed at Sans.

Laron snorted an obnoxious laugh and Illem immediately caught why. "It's winter both places. Blanket winter."

The teacher raised an eyebrow. "Explain."

Illem carefully planned the words in his head and they came out fluid and methodically. "From December to early March, it's natural winter in the northern hemisphere due to the tilting of the Earth's axis. That makes it summer in the southern hemisphere, where we are. But February has 28 days because it marks an astronomical event called eclipse winter. Eclipse winter is an increase in the amount of matter between the

southern hemisphere and the sun, causing a sharp decrease in the amount of sunlight that hits our side of the Earth for four weeks. The result is a short winter in the middle of summer. The period during which both hemispheres are in winter is called blanket winter."

Without missing a beat, Mr. Smeuam replied, "That's right. Very good explanation, Illem."

His heart rang again, light and fluttery tones as the pressure lifted from his shoulders. Victoriously he looked over at Jommy, who looked back and nodded in approval. Laron twisted around in his chair and gave him a quick thumbs-up.

"He just quoted last night's reading," a girl behind him sneered under her breath.

Luckily the teacher caught the jibe and replied to the whole class, "At least Mr. Krarnehe did last night's reading, which unfortunately can't be stated for all of you." The lunch bell rang loud and sharp, triggering an explosion of motion from the students, and he yelled to remain on top. "When we return from recess we'll be moving onto language studies so don't forget your assigned readings!" Before he finished his statement, half the class was out of the room and making their way to the cafeterias. Sure enough, by the time Illem and Jommy

convened around Laron's desk they were left alone in the classroom with Mr. Smeum.

"Good answer," Laron praised, placing his drawing pad into his desk.

"You knew it was a trick question, I heard you laugh," Illem said. "Why didn't you just answer it?"

Laron shrugged. "Eh. Where's the fun in that?" He looked at Jommy for an answer, who shrugged in response. All three friends shrugged until Laron said, "Let's go to lunch."

The three friends stepped out into the hall and plunged into the flow of students streaming toward the cafeteria. Here and there a younger or older student fought the tide back to their class. By the time they arrived, the line to purchase food ran out the double cafeteria doors, down the hall, across another hall and around a corner. As they worked their way to the end of the line, Illem saw a girl from another class wave to Laron, a blushing smile creeping over her face. Comparatively, Laron's returning wave was practically emotionless, as if half his heart was asleep and only a small portion of the other half decided it was worth the effort to wave.

Illem often wondered at night if he was jealous of his friend. The trio made small talk on the line, every few minutes being interrupted by someone coming along to say hello to Laron,

or to wave to him as they passed by, or give him a note that he probably wouldn't read unless he became bored with drawing in class, which he never did. Ever so slowly they wound their way through the school and toward the cafeteria, Laron constantly entertaining whoever his guest was for this minute, during which Illem and Jommy kept to themselves. Even the lunch ladies were especially nice to him, regularly giving him just a *little* extra on top of what he asked for.

By the time they walked into the dining hall with trays full of food, others were already clearing their tables. Not even Illem and Jommy sitting at his lunch table could stem the tide of Laron's friends, a fact Illem had long ago come to terms with as a good thing: it meant, at its simplest, that he wasn't a deterrent. Then again, even Jommy and his ant-killing glasses couldn't keep people away from Laron, making Illem to constantly question his acceptance of the situation, leaving him in a perpetual state of social wonder and anxiety.

And now his father was coming! The very thought ran shivers of dread down his spine as he picked at his food. If they weren't letting teachers teach chemistry, something he'd been studying for over a year now, would they let his father really talk about Will? In his heart, Illem prayed so; they had already taken his favorite subject away from him and with the weather

outside still raging white, it looked as if he might not make it to Sans for his Will class. Into his plate of lunch meat and vegetables, he prayed for his deepest, most solemn wish. Please don't say anything embarrassing.

It was a shock then, when he turned to Jommy and saw his hands clenched together, fingers intertwined, eyes closed and his head down on his hands.

"What are you doing?" Illem asked, bewildered.

"Praying," Jommy said almost solemnly.

"For what?" Laron asked, suddenly paying attention.

Jommy picked his head up and answered, "For the snow to let up. So we can go to Will school tonight."

"I was just thinking the same thing," Illem said, taking a bite of his food.

"Yeah?" Laron asked lazily, "Who are you praying to?"

"The three goddesses. From The Truth." He shifted his glasses on his nose as he spoke.

"You read that stuff?" Illem asked.

"My dad said he read it when he was a kid, so he bought me a copy since it just came out again. It's a really cool story, you both should read it." Jommy's voice approached excitement, but quickly faded away. "I was hoping the three goddesses would stop the snow so we could all go learn Will together."

Laron's cool face become tinged with doubt. "I don't think I'm going anyway."

Jommy's eyes went wide. Illem blurted, "What? Why?"

Laron hesitated before answering. "My parents aren't going to let me go anymore. They said I don't need it. I think it's because of what happened yesterday." His tone was sad and accepting, his fate already decided.

"That's not fair!" Illem exclaimed a little too loudly, slamming his fists on the table. Faces all around stopped their talking and chewing and stared. Their icy looks cooled his temperature and Illem lowered his voice. "But you like going to Will class!"

"I do, but..." Laron's voice trailed off and his eyes became unusually shifty. Once they settled down he continued, "...but my parents said I can't."

The words raced from Illem's lips. "If they're worried about the weather, I'm sure my dad will drive you, it's not like he hasn't done it before."

Laron shrugged his signature shrug. "It's not the weather they're worried about. I dunno. They don't use Will very much and they said that I don't have to either."

"That's not--"

"-fair!" Jommy finished, eyes flared behind his huge glasses, cheeks flushed with red. "Will is a gift that was given to us by the goddesses. They say it's our responsibility to learn and understand it. If you want to learn to use it, why shouldn't you?"

Both other boys were too startled by the outburst to reply immediately. Jommy and Laron were polar opposites; at school, where Laron was expected to speak to everybody (and often did), Jommy typically didn't speak even to those who desired his conversation. An outburst from their silent friend was as frequent and shocking as the cold wind that blanket winter cut through summer.

Finally Laron replied, "Look, they don't want me to go, so I'm not going. There's nothing I can do about it. Lem, if you want me to go so bad, have your dad talk to them." It was hard to determine if his tone was a beg or a mock. "Maybe he can convince them, since he loves Will so much."

And with that, lightning began to course through the storm clouds that darkened Illem's mood. Given his track record today, he dared not speak the words *what else could go wrong*, even in the deepest depths of the back of his mind.

The rest of the meal passed sullen and silent, cross Illem picking listlessly at his lunch, Laron constantly scanning the rest of the lunch room, Jommy deep in his book.

When the silence was too much for the talkative boy to bear, Laron reached over and slid Jommy's book away from him.

"Hey," Jommy protested, halfheartedly.

"Where'd you get that goddess stuff, anyway?" Laron closed the book, holding Jommy's page with his fingers. The cover of the new book was a glossy red leather, with the title and author's name gleaming in a bright silver sheen: The Truth, *Andor*.

"It's all written in there," Jommy said, back in his usual meek tone. "Three goddesses give the main character eternal life and they teach him all about the world and Will."

Laron came very close to rolling his eyes. Instead, he turned the book and pointed to a word at the bottom of the spine. "You do know it's fiction, right?"

"Well, yeah," Jommy's voice grew more sheepish, if that was possible, "but it talks all about Will, and we can use Will, so part of it isn't at least."

"Uh-huh. What's the name of this main character?"

"Nublius."

"Then who's Andor?"

Jommy shook his head. "He was an inventor. They say he needed a story to publish on his new printing press and so he picked The Truth. Lots of cultures around the world have variations of The Truth, stories just like it just with different names. Andor just wrote it down."

"I know that, I did last night's reading too," Laron sneered uncharacteristically. "Where did he come up with a stupid name like Nublius?"

Jommy worked up enough courage to fill a thimble before answering. "I'd ask him, but he's been dead for four hundred years. Every once in a while they reprint it."

"Good for Andor, then," Laron snorted. He dropped the book back in front of Jommy, slipping his fingers out and losing his page. Illem watched Jommy clench his teeth tightly as Laron got up from the table to empty and return his lunch tray. Tensions reverberated almost audibly off the shrieking of the bell. A cold silence ensued between the trio in the rabble of the hallway until they arrived at the door of Mr. Smeuam's classroom.

Before they entered, Laron turned to Jommy and said, "Sorry."

When the quiet boy failed to respond, Laron repeated, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lose your page, I just..." Other

students pushed past the three friends to beat the bell. Laron's face turned as downtrodden as his tone. "It was because we were talking about Will school."

"It's ok," Jommy mustered after a time. "It's just a book. I'll find my place again."

Illem was a heartbeat away from breaking up the tender moment when the bell above the classroom door exploded to life and forced his heart to skip two beats. The three friends, ears ringing long after the bell stopped, practically flew back to their assigned desks amidst a frenzy of students rushing every which way. Outside the tall classroom windows the endless white grew, snow continuing to douse the colors of the landscape. Most of the class had settled in their seats by the time Mr. Smeuam arrived a moment later. Wasting no time, their teacher picked up exactly where they left off.

"Good afternoon class," he announced.

Two calls overlapped in response. The first, "Good afternoon Mr. Smeuam," garnered smiles from the young teacher; the second, "Good afternoon Mr. Spew-em," reaped those smiles and converted them into stern stares that scanned the class. He decided the taunt wasn't worth the effort.

"If you'll open your language studies books, we'll continue where we left off. We've been studying a chronological history

of storytelling and books. Where did we stop at the end of yesterday's class," his eyes flew through the students' faces, "Laron?"

The bored boy in the front row flicked his pen and it twirled around his thumb. He answered flatly, "We were up to the printing press."

"Right. The printing press allowed books to be mass produced for the first time in history. And where did the printing press come from? Who invented it?" Hands shot up all around the class. The teacher pointed to a girl to Illem's left, and she recited the answer from the previous night's assigned reading, word for word. "Andor invented the printing press 455 years ago in the year 1335 in a small town called Pruvi in Eastern Tainkerienne. Andor, a poor inventor, received the money to fund the development of his printing press from a rich merchant whose name was Bigi."

"Excellent," the teacher praised, "and who knows what the first book that came off that first printing press was? Jommy?"

It occurred to Illem that Jommy was an easy target: he was nose deep in his book again, so that the only part of his head the teacher could see was the top. But to Illem's surprise, Jommy wasn't startled by the sudden attention. Instead he picked up his red covered book without saying a word and he held it up.

Mr. Smeuam tried to coax an answer out of him. "And what book is that?"

At that, Jommy spoke. "The Truth."

"We learned about The Truth when we discussed the history of storytelling: almost every country on Earth has a variation of this story. So why did Andor pick this one to publish as his first book?"

"He didn't. Bigi noticed how most cultures he came across in his travels spoke of it in one form or another, so he convinced Andor to use it as his first printed book. The version of the story that Andor wrote down and published he titled The Truth, even though he knew it was just a tale."

"Why did he call it The Truth?"

Jommy shrugged. "Nobody knows. It's a parable about unity and peace. Maybe it was wishful thinking." These last words barely escaped Jommy's mouth before his book was back on the desk, his face buried in its pages.

Before continuing, Mr. Smeuam pointed over Illem's head to a boy in the back who had raised his hand.

"My parents say The Truth is true, and that Nublius is going to come lead us to a world of peace," the boy said.

A smattering of giggles floated to the surface of the class, but were quickly swatted down by the teacher's looks. He

had to compose himself before he responded, to ensure no offense. "Many people believe many different parts of The Truth. Some believe that there are two other Earths out there full of people just like you and me. However, it is widely accepted that The Truth is an adaptation of a widely spread folk story." He paused to make sure his words didn't induce any laughs. "But it's because people believe in this story that Andor and Bigi decided to publish it." Despite his teacher's best efforts, the boy's face was bright red and pointed at his desk by the time Illem turned around and looked back.

And then, there was a knock on the classroom door. Illem's heart slammed to a halt before remembering that it had a duty to fulfill and sputtering back into rhythm. If that was his best effort... Illem thought. While Mr. Smeuam walked over to the door, he leaned over to Jommy (who hadn't even looked up) and whispered, "If you could pray to those goddesses again, please do."

At that, Jommy looked away from his book. "What for?"

Mr. Smeuam opened the door and exchanged a few quiet words with the man outside. Illem couldn't hear what they were saying, but the teacher looked even more flustered than before, running his fingers through his messy hair repeatedly as he spoke. He pointed to his watch and the lesson on the blackboard,

whispering rapidly. Through the track of the door, Illem saw his father's tight golden curls bob up and down as he whispered back to the teacher. Finally Mr. Smeuam seemed to relent, and he closed the door.

"Pray that I survive my dad," Illem whispered to his friend, but Jommy's lack of response gave him little hope that his message got through.

Mr. Smeuam cleared his throat. "Well class, our speaker has arrived a little early. I'd like to introduce you to our guest today. He works at a company that works with Will and Will related business, so he's come to discuss what he does with us. If you have any questions, please save them for the end of the presentation. Please welcome, Mr. Gusan Krarnehe." Illem had finished his own prayers to the goddesses, one for each of them, by the time his teacher opened the door and his father entered.

A heavy silence blanketed the room, but Illem didn't notice; it was easily overtaken by the nervous thumping of his pulse in his ears. Outside, the snow laden wind rushed across the window panes, whistling in the crevices and cracks in the walls and windows. Gusan made his way across the room carrying a black shoulder bag that Illem knew contained his work materials. His thin face dared not glance at the class and his eyes danced ahead of him, from the floor to the blackboard to the windows.

All eyes watched as he placed the bag on the teacher's desk, stood against the black board with his arms resting at his front. He smiled nervously at the class and looked over to Mr. Smeuam without saying a word.

A few awkward seconds passed, dragged on by the weight of the silence in class, before Mr. Smeuam replied, "Whenever you're ready Mr. Krarnehe, the floor is yours."

"Oh! Of course, I didn't know you already introduced me," Illem's father said.

"Yes, before you entered," the teacher replied.

"Alright," Gusan addressed the class, "good afternoon everyone."

The class wafted a weak reply at him. Illem felt a small part of him shrink inside and wished his whole body could do the same.

"Your teachers and principal asked me to come talk to you today about an important issue that is going to affect you guys as you grow up. But before I begin, let's take a short survey. Whose parents here own a car?" All hands except Illem's rose into the air.

"Who knows what makes those cars go?" A handful of students lowered their arms. Gusan scanned the class nervously and

pointed to a girl in the second row. "What powers your parents' car?"

"Hydrogen," the girl answered with a tinge of a question.

"Right, hydrogen. Who here has seen their parents filling their cars up with hydrogen at home?" When the movement stopped, only four hands were left in the air.

"And who here has been with their parents when they've refueled their cars at a HydroDen?" All the hands from the first question returned, Illem's still notably missing.

His father nodded. "Thank you for your answers, you can all put your hands down now." He cleared his throat and picked up a piece of chalk from the blackboard.

"Ever since cars were invented seventy years ago, nobody ever questioned what would power them." Gusan's speech was stunted and broken, as if his voice couldn't decide on a tone or meter. "Hydrogen, we learn in basic chemistry, has a weight of one. It's the easiest element to summon using Will, provides the baseline by which we measure all other summons and is incredibly flammable, making it an excellent fuel. For years, drivers Willed the hydrogen to fuel their cars, and why wouldn't you? It was free, you could do it in the comfort of your own home but if you ever needed to refuel on the road, you just needed to keep a

Will stone in the car with you for a quick fill up anywhere you needed it.

"However, recent studies into how Will works have suggested that when you will something, even something as simple as hydrogen, you're not creating a gas, or a liquid, or a solid. You're replacing what is already there with what you are summoning. This is the heart of the issue I've been asked to come discuss with you guys today. Who knows what this issue is called, maybe you've seen it on the news." When only puzzled faces responded to his question, Gusan turned to his son.

"Illem?"

The sudden attention startled Illem almost as much as the wet wad of paper that hit him squarely in the back of the neck at the same time. His nostrils flared and he whipped around to confront his assailant, but they had cowardly hidden their weapon. Flustered, he turned back to his father, who looked on expectantly and remarked, "Yes, son, I was asking you."

Illem attempted to douse the flames of the class' laughter. "No, not that, I got hit with-" he began, but stopped short. In the front row, Laron lowered his head to his desk, slowing shaking it from side to side. A deep breath later, Illem answered his father's question. "Environmental imbalance."

Gusan didn't wait for the laughs to die down before turning to write the answer in large letters on the blackboard.

"Environmental imbalance. Let's say you're summoning water into a glass right in front of you. It was previously assumed that when you Will the water, the air around it moves out of the way to make room for the new water and the cup fills up. Now some scientists believe that when you Will water, the air that was previously there is replaced, and lost." A hand went up to Illem's right. "Yes?"

"But we need water to drink."

"Water is important, yes," Gusan said carefully, "but it doesn't have to be water. Imagine if everybody Willed a little bit and each time they did, a little air was lost. A little adds up to a lot and after a while, we start losing all the air we need to breathe. This slow change in the environment due to our overuse of Will is called environmental imbalance: throwing off the chemical stability of the world by replacing vital elements and compounds a little bit at a time."

Illem has never known his father to be overly confident. Small wiry glasses edged toward the end of his thin nose as his eyes flitted around the crowd. His father's job wasn't something that had him in front of people all day, Illem knew. He wondered

if the group was the cause of his nervousness, or if it was something else.

Ever since his father began to address environmental imbalance, something about the situation struck Illem as strange. Most things about the scene of the room remained familiar: Laron's head never left his desk, Jommy plowed through pages of The Truth, other students stared straight ahead with a forced earnest or didn't bother pretending and stared out the window. Illem had heard many of his father's varied speaking tones over the years, different whether he was speaking to him and his brother, his coworkers or boss on the phone, strangers on the street, but none of those sounded similar to how Gusan addressed the class. He tried to make a mental note to ask his father later.

The strangeness might have made Gusan's speech awkward, but it failed to stop him. "Some scientists are worried that people summoning raw elements out in the world every day is slowly throwing off the balance of the world, so that's where companies like mine come in. HydroDen specializes in using Will and other methods to gain the hydrogen fuel we need, and then we distribute it using our HAD filling stations. HAD stands for," he turned back to the blackboard, erased what was there and wrote in big letters again, "hydrogen automated delivery. HAD

stations are places where people can come and refuel their cars with little or no effect on the environment since they don't have to Will their fuel themselves."

Illem rolled his eyes reflexively when the water boy raised his hand again. "Is the hydrogen free? That they get from you, I mean," he asked when Gusan pointed to him.

"Not free, no. Even though our purpose is to provide hydrogen without sacrificing the environment, we're still a business. We have to charge for our hydrogen so we can continue doing what we're doing: researching alternate methods to create or harness the fuel we rely on."

He paused for a moment and just before he spoke again, Illem's hand went up. Son watched father consider carefully before reacting, as if the latter didn't know what to expect from the former.

"What happened yesterday that cancelled our chemistry lesson today?" Illem asked, staring straight through his father's round glasses and into his hazel eyes behind.

Illem immediately regretted raising his hand. It was plain to see that Gusan's preparedness didn't extend to his son's question. He looked nervously to Mr. Smeuam (leaning against the door, arms folded across his chest) for a response. The teacher

offered only, "Chemistry lessons have been cancelled for the remainder of the week until the school board can convene."

A bothered look tinged Illem's fathers' face. "I don't know the details of why you can or can't study chemistry but..." His weakly rehearsed words tumbled back into his throat and were choked out a jumbled mess. "But I'm sure th-the board had a, a very good reason for tak-k-king such steps. It is important to a uh, to understand the basics of chemistry so one can make his, or her, their own decisions about Will, about how to use Will." Gusan kept looking to the teacher for assistance but it wasn't until the classes' murmurs rose that he stepped in to assist.

"Alright everybody settle down, settle down. Mr. Krarnehe still has a few more minutes to take questions before he has to move onto the next class," the teacher barked halfheartedly.

Once the thrum of student voices faded into the wind beating against the classroom windows, Gusan gathered himself and continued. "What happened last night in downtown Sans is an example of why you kids need to study chemistry. You need to be able to make informed decisions about Will and its safe usage." He would have liked to continue, but Mr. Smeuam's eyes burned accusingly from the doorway. "Discuss what you see on the news with your parents, and-"

To Illem and the rest of the class' dismay, their teacher sensed that his fathers' speech had become far too interesting and decided to put an end to it. "Are there any final questions for Mr. Krarnehe? Well, thank you for coming today, we appreciate your explanation of environmental imbalance and how people and corporations are stepping up to deal with this *very real threat.*"

Illem's relationship with his teacher had soured that morning, even if Mr. Smeuam didn't know it yet, when the teacher announced that his favorite class had been cancelled. All sense of embarrassment or fear had blurred into anger; Illem's ongoing frustrations made him want to jump up, tell the teacher to shut up and yell for his father to continue. Gusan had a stony look on his face, as solid as a dam about to burst. The class, not really sure how to handle the awkward ending, applauded weakly while Illem's father gathered his things and left the classroom.

Well over an hour remained before the final bell rang, a fact that Mr. Smeuam visibly regretted given the final subject of the day. From the front row, Laron turned to look back at Illem and Jommy. He mouthed something to his friends behind him, but above the rumbling din of the class Illem couldn't make out quite what. Desperately trying to regain order, Mr. Smeuam rapped on his desk with a book, jolting his students into

silence. He rubbed his temples and prayed for the day to end as fiercely as any student, but out loud he said, "Last lesson of the day guys... current events."

Illem wondered what his father had wanted to say at the end of his speech and he didn't want to wait until the end of the day to ask. Now that his angry curiosity overwhelmed his fear of social death, he wanted to track down his father in his next class and make him answer his questions. It was an older class, definitely, fifth graders, maybe they were allowed to discuss things like that. Maybe his father could answer why everybody seemed so intent on annoying him; the only class he had a genuine interest in had been taken away, Laron couldn't go to Will school anymore, he couldn't even Will a mug of water without burning himself. His frustration boiled and thumped in the blacks of his palms as a girl approached the front of the class for current events and the resulting steam shot his hand into the air suddenly.

"I have to go to the bathroom," he snapped.

Frustrations flared in his teacher too. "You weren't called on to speak out of turn like that Illem, but go so you won't cause any more disturbances." Jommy and Laron looked on in confusion as Illem marched out of the room in a hurry.

It didn't take very long for Illem to realize how stupid he'd look marching into an older class and demanding answers from his father. Instead he angrily wandered the halls, surprising himself when he actually did end up in the boys bathroom. He slammed the door behind him and ran a fist across the stalls. The lights were off, the entire room lit by a thin, frosted glass window. He paced around the room muttering speeding words in his head as they flew by, tracing his fingers across the blue tile that covered all the walls and floor. Finally, as the torrent of words shrank to a trickle, he placed his forehead against the tile, hoping their cold surfaces would absorb the heat rushing around his head.

When he had calmed he stared at the window; opaque enough for privacy, the wispy swirl of snow danced behind like a white shadow. His study of Will and the chemistry behind it was still in its infancy, he would ruminate later. For the moment all he knew was that they had stripped him of the class that gave him the most satisfaction. At least he still had Will to Live.

He made no hurry to get back to class. Each step purposefully took longer to complete than the last, each shrinking shorter and shorter. Had he known that he'd arrive back to such excitement, he might have hurried so as not to miss it. Statistically speaking, excitement during current events so

late in the day was highly improbable, so Illem took care not to touch any cracks between the fake marble tiles of the hallway while being sure he stepped on every single one of them.

He had no concept of how long he'd spent meandering in the hallways but his teacher didn't seem to notice his delayed return. Laron stood at the front of the class, his face red and eyes engaged, more open than Illem had ever seen them in Mr. Smeuam's class before.

"I said we're not discussing it here, the school board says it's inappropriate and so we will not talk about it," Mr. Smeuam spat angrily.

"This isn't about what the school board wants!" Laron said, rallying the class with a large arm motion. He waved a piece of paper in front of him. "This is about discussing current events! What's more current than yesterday?"

The teacher changed the subject in a flash. "Your assignment was to bring in a newspaper clipping. You brought a print out of an article from your computer."

"You're avoiding the issue here!" Laron's rage had raised most of the class to their feet. Even Jommy had put down his book, staring at the teacher albeit from his seat. "You just don't want us to discuss anything that has to do with Will, Mr. Spew-em!"

Laron's words stepped into the deep end, plunging the class' spirits into a cold bath. The nervous hush didn't last long. "That's it, Laron, I've had enough, go to the principal's office. I'll meet you there once class is over."

Laron cried, "You can't do that!" Every corner of the room was on their feet, staring, jaws agape.

The teacher pointed to the door, "Out."

Still in front of the door, Illem watched his friend, cool, collected, enviable Laron, slam his papers to the floor and march toward him. Laron brushed past with a huff, angry words fluttering from his mouth under his frantic breath, and slammed the door behind. Slowly, the remaining students sank back into their chairs and Mr. Smeuam, a vein thick in his forehead, noticed Illem standing by the door.

Hoping to not cause a stir, Illem sidled down the columns of desks. He was facing away from him when his teacher made his heart jump.

"As long as you're standing, Mr. Krarnehe, why don't you present your current events article next?"

Illem felt his face fill with such redness that he thought it would force the sweat out of his skin to make room. He turned back to his teacher and said without thinking, "I don't have one."

Mr. Smeuam rubbed the throbbing vein in his forehead. He asked, "What do you mean?" in an incredulous tone.

"I mean I don't have one." As he spoke, Illem lowered himself into his seat. "I must have forgotten to do it. I don't have anything to present."

"Then you'll be getting a zero for today's assignment. Who here has an article for current events today that hasn't already presented?" About half the room's hands went up, very few of them doing so with confidence. The teacher caught the hint. "And whose articles aren't about the events from last night?" Only three hands remained in the air at final count. Mr. Smeuam marked those three students in his grade book before clasping his hands together on his desk and leaning forward toward his class. "Class, you had a full week to gather articles for this subject. This means that you either didn't do the assignment until last night or you thought that this topic trumped whatever your first article was about and decided to switch. While I appreciate your earnest in the second scenario, if everybody brings in the same article, we won't talk about a wide variety of topics. Please bring in a more varied pool of articles from throughout the week next time."

Mr. Grigant Smeuam was more inexperienced than he had hoped. On the first day of class, Illem listened attentively as

his teacher introduced himself and explained that not only was in their first time being in the fourth grade, but this was also his first time teaching it. He had spent many hours student teaching all ages and grade levels, always arriving to class with a smile on his face and his short brown hair neatly combed to one side (always the left). His energy was his greatest strength, his teachers had said, and he told his class on that first day that he hoped they would reciprocate.

Unfortunately for his neatly combed hair, his enthusiasm for teaching extended no further than his lesson plan: students soon figured out how to press their teacher's buttons by asking questions to purposefully derail his lessons and throw him off. Slowly, his hair became less flat with each passing lesson and by midway through the school year, it lay untouched after being toweled off, a tangled mess left loose to better allow his hand to run through it each day. Over the course of the lessons, fewer questions would turn his face an angry red (a sign of victory to a nine-year-old boy, he discerned) and his control over the class waned while his blood pressure waxed.

On this day, Mr. Smeuam leaned back in his chair, opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out a small white pottle of pills, which he placed in front of him. "Please try to understand: I want to discuss topics like what happened

yesterday with you, and I don't want to stop our chemistry lessons. Most of my frustrations today haven't been with you guys, but with the school administration. It angers me that you have shown such interest in a topic but I'm not allowed to discuss it with you. I promise you guys though, that once these topics are fair game, we'll spend all the time you want talking about them. These are the issues you should be talking about, and I apologize for not being allowed to take the time out to discuss them.

"Unfortunately, since we can't continue our current events session for this week and you still have around forty minutes left in the day, use the rest of today as study hall. I'm going to meet with the principal, so feel free to do your homework or assigned readings. Just don't leave the class before the final bell rings, ok?"

The class chimed, "Yes Mr. Smeuam." Illem and the rest of the students felt no need to delay their teacher; Mr. Smeuam packed up his things and left the room.

Once the door clicked shut behind him, the haze of noise returned to the room. Each student turned to confer with their neighbors, Illem no exception. "What happened to Laron?" he asked Jommy, who hadn't yet returned to the safe confines of his book. Jommy looked at him to answer, but a girl's voice came

from behind him in response. "Mr. Spew-em told him he wouldn't discuss his article, but Laron wouldn't shut up," she said.

Illem looked past his friend to see the girl. "Is that it? That's what all that was about?"

She shrugged her shoulders, her long hair falling around them. "Laron called him a hypocrite. I mean, he's right. He told us to bring in articles, and then he says we couldn't talk about it."

"Mr. Smeuam said he'd give him credit for bringing something, but revoked it when he kept arguing," Jommy added.

"Maybe if he hadn't argued we all would've gotten credit for bringing something," the girl said scornfully.

Illem frowned and faced his desk. A selfish thought flitted through his mind, tinging all his thoughts with remorse. He realized in that moment that the only thing he had expected to go wrong hadn't, but everything else had. Does that make it all ok? he wondered. His regret bled through his mind like ink through water, pushing tears to the back of his eyes. The nine-year-old boy looked down at his desk and blinked to fight them back, wiping at his eyes with his fingers.

Jommy's voice startled him. "Did you really not bring an article?"

Almost frightened that he'd been seen, Illem looked at his friend. The Truth lay closed in front of him, the mirrored silver letters reflecting the dismal snow as it battered the window panes. Illem shook his head. "I brought one. It was about yesterday."

"Oh," Jommy answered. He looked for a moment like he was preparing a response, shuffling his eyes between his friend, his desk and his book. The awkward pause extended to an awkward moment, until Jommy gave up the effort, picked up his book and read. The girl to his left was chatting away with her friend a row over, her attention to Illem long expired.

Even with their teacher gone, the class' noise never rose loud enough to drown out the constant winter outside. The two layers of white noise suited Illem just fine; they cushioned his thoughts as they bounced around in his head and protected sneaky ones that escaped through his mouth. Before he knew where the time went, the final bell rang sharp and clear through the halls of the school. Most of the class sprang to the door like horses at the gate to join the surge of students outside. When the pattering of rushing feet faded all that was left were the whipping of the winds, and Jommy and Illem collecting their things.

"Come on, let's go meet my dad," Illem said, hefting his bag over his shoulder. Jommy complied and the two friends pushed their way into the flow of the hallway to be swept away toward the entrance of the school, where his father should be waiting.

The lobby scene was much the same as it was in the morning, except in reverse: older students led trains of younger students to their waving parents and waiting busses, small bodies moving in all directions amidst the occasional teacher or janitor. Today differed only in that there was a universal reluctance to go outside, so it was even more crowded than normal. Luckily for Illem, his father's curly hair was an easy beacon to spot over the ranks of elementary schoolers. He and Jommy made their way toward the front door where his father and his brother stood waiting. Mern's oversized winter coat was drawn and ready for the cold; straight blond hair spilled out the top of the tight peep hole that remained at the front of his tightly drawn hood. Even though he couldn't see his mouth, Illem could feel the huge grin on Mern's face for beating his big brother to the front doors of school.

Once the two older boys pulled on their coats, Gusan said, "That's everybody. Let's get going! We'll probably hit pretty bad traffic in this weather." The three boys waddled hurriedly to the waiting car, backpacks bouncing heavily against their

padded jackets. Gusan held his bag over his head despite the wind whipping upwards, resulting in a series of comic expressions glancing off his face as quickly as the snow did. The car beeped as its driver approached. As fast as the boys tried to throw their bags into the back and climb in, the snow was always faster, and by the time the kids settled into their seats, their surfaces were sprinkled with white.

"I love the snow!" Mern wailed happily from the front seat as he clicked his seat belt shut. In the back, Jommy and Illem looked at each other. Illem rolled his eyes but his friend assumed his normal traveling position: staring at his hands awkwardly. Snow fell freely from Gusan's hair while he started the car and adjusted the heat controls. Within a few seconds warm air blasted from the vents.

"Everybody got their seat belts on back there?" Gusan looked in the rear view mirror.

"Yes," the boys in the back replied in unison once they had secured themselves.

"Then we're off," Gusan said with little gusto.

Nobody had responded to Mern's declaration but that didn't stop him from humming like their mother as the car slowly worked its way from the crowded parking lot and began the long drive to Sans. Many of the roads were treacherous, but Gusan seemed to

trust his large, boxy car on its big wheels. Through the glass in the roof the gray sky never moved. It looked to Illem like there was a never ending supply of snow up there.

"Dad, why doesn't anybody use Will to stop the snow?" Illem asked abruptly.

Gusan took his eyes off the snowy road for only a few seconds to look at his son in the mirror. "What do you mean, Lem?"

He considered his wording for a moment. "I mean, like... if we can use Will, which makes heat, to produce water and the other stuff that snow and clouds are made of, then why can't we use Will to change the weather?"

His father's response was quick. "Well, using that much Will is illegal, and dangerous."

His answer didn't sit right with Illem. "I know it's illegal, but even before it was illegal you never heard of anybody doing it. Did people do it before the laws were passed?"

This time his father thought before he spoke. "Look up at the clouds, Lem. How far away are they?"

"Really far away."

"If something is that far away and it looks pretty big, then how big must it really be?"

"Really big."

Gusan looked away from the road again for a second. "The reason nobody uses Will to control the weather is because nature is simply too powerful." A smile graced his voice. "Nobody can even come close to using that much Will without burning or even killing themselves on their Will stone."

Illem nodded subconsciously. "But you use Will every day."

That made his father laugh. "I may use it every day, but only in small doses and only how the law says I can. Practice can improve the efficiency of your Will, allowing you to summon more, but it will never change the fact that your stone would kill you before you even came close to affecting anything. Even if I lived forever and practiced using as much as I could every day, I'd never be able to change the weather."

"Oh." Illem had had quite enough of not getting the answers he wanted, so he kept the rest of his questions to himself.

Jommy reached into the back and got his book out of his bag, Illem looking on with pity. He placed the The Truth in his lap and screwed up his face with consideration: he wanted so badly to continue where he left off, but everyone knew how sick the motions of the car made him, even when he didn't try to read. Before the motion sickness could take its usual toll, the edges of his cheeks began to flush green from the anxiety of being unable to read. Illem grabbed the book away from him and

pointed out the window. Jommy twisted and placed his nose against the cold glass, a growing fog creeping around his face, spiking under his nose as he breathed slow and deep. He stared up at the power lines dipping and weaving at the side of the road, letting the cool air soothe his sudden nausea.

Mern's humming soon adopted the meter of the windshield wipers' thrum. As they sped along, Gusan commented here and there about the lack of cars on the road. "Guess the snow's scared everybody away," he'd comment to no reply. Each of the children was silently amused by their windows, relentless wind and snow giving chase and whipping past in all directions. It was Gusan who ultimately cracked under the weight of the silence. He reached over and turned up the radio.

A man's voice crackled through the speakers. "Police braved the cold today to scour the scene, but any residual elemental evidence has been destroyed by the weather, one officer said. Although the attacker was killed at the scene, the intensity of the explosion has left very little evidence with which to identify him. A Will stone, which police believe to be the one that was used to create the attack, has been found but investigators are doubtful that it will help in identifying the monster behind his seemingly random attack. The attack claimed the lives of at least six, injuring twenty more and causing

hundreds of thousands of dollars in damage to the surrounding buildings on the busy downtown street. More and more witnesses are coming forward with information, and if you know anything, please contact—" From his seat Illem couldn't see Gusan press a button on the steering wheel, but he could see the awkward motion his father made with his head when he heard something uncomfortable. No sooner had Illem started to listen intently when soft music wailed from the speakers at his father's command. He opened his mouth to question his father once more, but it was his brother who spoke first.

"Dad, what happened last night?" Mern asked with his annoying sing-song tone.

Gusan looked at his younger son and said, "I don't really know, Mern. Maybe you should ask Mrs. Irptau."

Illem jumped in. "Do you think she'll be able to talk about it with us? Mr. Smeuam made a really big deal about it."

"Mr. Smeuam!" Mern chuckled. "Smeuam. Smeuam!"

"Well, Will to Live is a lot closer to where it actually happened, and its her job to teach you about Will, so I don't see why not. You should at least ask about it. You won't have to wait very long." That tiny bit of encouragement raised Illem's snow covered spirits. Gusan slowed the car, pulled hard on the

parking brake and announced, "We're here!" He turned to the kids. "You guys know the drill, right?"

"Front desk, thirty-third floor, Will to Live," his sons responded. Illem sidled toward Jommy, who gripped the door handle.

"Right. I'll meet you here when class is over. Good luck out there."

Illem and Mern responded "Bye, Dad" as they opened their doors, but the blast of cold air shoved their words back into their mouths.

The smooth glass skins of tall buildings funneled the wind and snow into a focused fervor; even the snow didn't have a chance to rest in the white turmoil of downtown Sans. The kids emerged from the car and wind ripped at their faces, assaulted on all sides by the cold as they ran awkwardly in the snow to the door. The city was ill prepared to deal with weather like this. Snow and slush splattered with each drudging step under their thick boots. The heavy rotating door of the skyscraper moved painfully slow, so Illem, Mern and Jommy threw all their weight against it to escape the cold.

The inside of the lobby looked and felt warm. A polished marble floor reflected a gold trim that ran around the elegantly appointed wood carved walls. Paintings looked down from almost a

hundred feet above, protected from the light of the huge windows by thousands of crystals hanging from the domed ceiling. Illem barely took notice anymore and Jommy stared at the floor, but Mern still gazed up at the cavernous space, higher and higher, until Illem thought his brother might fall over backwards. To prevent any injury that would no doubt be blamed on him, Illem took Mern's hand and dragged him toward the front desk, where a woman in a tidy uniform sat.

The woman asked cheerfully, "Where are you young gentlemen headed?" She had clearly not been outside in a while.

"Thirty-third floor, please." Illem repeated his father's instructions. "Will to Live."

The woman smiled. "That's what I thought. I've gone ahead and called them for you, someone should be right down."

Illem thanked the lady and turned back to his brother, face still to the ceiling. They only had to wait a minute before a young man, only a few years older than Illem, emerged from the elevators. Illem always remembered the teenager because he thought he had a very strange name. His clothes gave away how long he'd been inside: a black t-shirt hung around his thin frame. His hands only left the pockets of his blue jeans long enough to beckon the three boys over to the elevator. Together,

the four of them loaded the elevator and the teenager pressed the button for the thirty-third floor.

Even the inside of the elevator was opulent. Polished brass bannisters, covered with fingerprints from a day's use, protected the wood paneled walls. Dull brass panels covered the ceiling, broken only to provide holes for the recessed lights.

Silence seemed to be an overarching theme to this day, with Mern determined to break it. "Hi Steve!" he blurted.

"Hello Mern," Steve replied, sounding tired.

"Aren't you cold?" Mern asked.

Steve looked at Illem, who offered only a shrug. "I've been inside all day. It's nice and warm up in the school."

"Oh. That's good then," Mern said.

"Where's Laron today?" Steve asked, pulling his hands from his pocket and folding them in front of him. A white metal chain clung tightly around his wrist. "Snowed in?"

Jommy offered an answer first. "His parents said he couldn't come."

"There have been a lot of absences today, due to the weather," Steve remarked, but before any of the boys could explain why Laron really wasn't coming, the elevator slowed and jolted to a stop. Compared to the aesthetic warmth of the lobby and elevator, the entrance to Will to Live felt flat and

sterile. Blank white walls with an ugly gray trim by the floor ran down every corridor. Every here and there an old picture of Will to Live teachers and contributors broke up the blank space, but most of the color was provided by the people who worked there.

Except for the teachers, whose clothes always matched the walls. After your first class at Will to Live, everybody knew the unofficial dress code for teachers: whenever you were teaching you had to be in all white. Whole classes rolled their eyes at new students who invariably made it a point to ask about the teacher's clothes. The answer always ranged from quiet understanding (from the teachers) or heavy sarcasm (from the class; Illem was partial to sarcasm).

Not that he or his friends had any seniority in this school despite their age. Classes at Will to Live were broken up by skill level, with students starting as young as four years old. It had taken the pleading of two children to convince Gusan and Tashe to send their children to Will school: having gone through the same public education system as their children, they had expected a much richer Will education during regular school hours. After realizing the extent to which the Will curriculum had been pared down since their days in grades one through five, Illem and Mern's request for extra Will lessons suddenly had

more validity. Then it had taken much persuasion on Illem's part to get Jommy and Laron to go too.

Unfortunately, the three nine-year-olds stuck out of their beginner Will classes. A majority of the students in the class were ages four to six, and Mern was quick to establish a group of friends. To that end, Illem, Jommy and Laron mostly kept to themselves.

Today only three students entered their classroom instead of the usual four. Most of the students had already unpacked and sat down. The effect of the weather on the class sat at empty desks: over a third of their classmates hadn't shown up. Mern ran ahead, retrieved his books from his cubby in the back and joined his troupe, smaller today than usual. Illem and Jommy took their time gathering their text books before sitting down at the other end of the room. With a few minutes to spare before class started, Jommy opened up one of the textbooks, Elementary Elements, and read. Illem took his usual place staring out the window at the wind and snow.

Normally the view from the classroom was a beautiful coastal vista: the buildings of downtown gave way to suburbs and mountains to the west and green ocean to the east, separated by a beach that stretched north nearly to the horizon splayed out underneath the vividly variegated sky. Today that sky was a mute

gray, the colors losing the fight through the clouds and the dark daystars all but invisible, and the snow prevented seeing further than the nearest skyscraper.

It came as no surprise to Illem, then, that a snow pile was the first thing he thought of when their teacher entered the room. A stout woman clad all in white, Mrs. Irptau's roundness gave her a funny walk, as if she was constantly meandering in a straight line. Her loose fitting dress flowed generously as she waddled. On her round head wafted tufts of white hair, curls as round as the rest of her. A white chain bracelet was pulled taut around her thick wrist, seemingly preventing it from getting any thicker. Even her glasses were round, sitting atop her oddly flat nose at such an angle that was nothing less than a silent defiance of gravity.

But for her failings as a regularly shaped person (or her successes as a globe, from Illem's point of view) she was a nice, grandmotherly woman who knew an awful lot about Will, physics and chemistry. A small pouch hung from her hand that clicked softly as she walked that no doubt contained the Will stones they'd be using in today's lesson. She placed the pouch on the empty table at the front of the room and picked up a piece of chalk from the blackboard behind it, where she wrote out one word in a wonderfully flowing cursive: temperature.

While she wrote, the door opened again and a man with messy brown hair entered. He was older than their teenaged escort, though Illem was fairly sure he'd never seen him before, so how much older he couldn't say. Mrs. Irptau looked at the man and nodded. He made his way between the children to the back of the class with a notebook in his hand, where he took an empty seat in a corner.

The noise from the class gradually faded as she wrote and by the time she'd finished all was silent. As if everything were in order, Mrs. Irptau addressed the class with an overwhelming cheeriness. "Boy, it sure is coooooold outside!"

Being a head or two taller than the other kids in the class didn't bother Illem, but this did. Since there only three nine-year-olds were enrolled in a class of thirty, Mrs. Irptau, who always taught beginner lessons for children, had to cater to the youngest students. Her tone always made Illem feel like he was in kindergarden again, a feeling made worse by Laron never seeming to notice and Jommy never seeming to care. In truth, however, it only took a sentence or two in each class before Illem got over it and began to focus on the lesson at hand.

"Today we're going to continue with what we started last lesson, talking about temperature. Who here knows what temperature is?" Most of the hands around the room shot up

energetically. Mrs. Irptau scanned the class and picked a girl in the front.

"How hot and cold something is?" the girl offered.

"It is difficult for something to be hot and cold at the same time," the old woman said to the girl with a smile, "but yes, temperature is how hot or cold something is." She turned again to write a number on the board, speaking as she wrote. "Who remembers what this is?" More hands shot up around the room, but Mern got the honor.

"Twenty-one degrees centigrade. That's room temperature," he answered confidently.

The teacher quickly followed. "And what is so important about room temperature?"

"That's the base temperature of all Will in this classroom." Mern's tone wavered a tiny bit.

"Why?"

His final answer was slower than his previous two. "Because that's how warm it is in here, and that's when its easiest to use Will."

"Correct! Let's do a quick demonstration to refresh our memories as to why. I need two volunteers." Eager hands rose and waved around frantically, one of which to Illem's surprise was Jommy's. Taking note of this unusual event, Mrs. Irptau selected

a girl from the front and Jommy to assist her. Both students made their way to the front of the class as the teacher prepared the experiment.

Mrs. Irptau retrieved three glasses from the front closet and set them on the table. She took three marble-sized stones from the pouch, giving one to each of her helpers and keeping one for herself. She cautioned her assistants, "Don't use any Will. If you do, you could throw off the demonstration." Both students nodded their understanding.

She asked her helpers, "How do those stones feel in your hands?"

"Cool," the girl said.

Jommy nodded in agreement, adding, "Room temperature."

"In this first glass," the teacher announced gallantly, "I'm going to Will water at the current temperature, just like we practice." With less effort than a wave of her hand, the first glass filled precisely to the middle with water, perfectly clear with not even a ripple on the top. She held up her Will stone between her fingers for the class to see. "This Will stone was used to summon water at room temperature. I will pass this around so you can get a feel for how warm it is." She handed the stone to a boy sitting in the front and beckoned her girl helper to hand her the second stone.

"In this glass, I'm going to Will hot water, like your parents would use to make tea," the teacher announced. Illem rubbed at his sore, bruised palms, feeling sheepish.

She held the stone loosely between her fingers and the second glass filled with steaming, bubbling water. This time she handed the stone back to her helper, asking, "How does that stone feel?"

"Warm," the girl answered.

"So, to summon something hot, it requires more effort and makes the stone warm." The teacher approached Jommy and took his stone from him. "Now, let's see what happens when we Will something cold." This time the glass filled up with water so cold that condensation immediately began to form on the side of the glass nearest the previous experiment. It only took a moment for the entire glass to become dripping wet on the outside. She handed the stone to Jommy and asked him about it.

"Warm," he answered softly.

"Well, that's strange!" She pointed at the first glass again. "If I Will some water at the same temperature as the room, the stone barely heats up. If I make some boiling hot water, it results in a hotter stone. Who can tell me why?" She picked a girl in the back.

"The more hotter something is than the room you're in, the harder it is to Will," she squeaked.

Mrs. Irptau got a fake screwed-up look on her face and asked, "What does that mean?" Still at the front of the class, Jommy raised his hand and the teacher motioned to him for an answer.

"If what you're Willing is hotter than the air around it, then it produces more heat in your stone," he answered practically under his breath.

The student sitting in front of Illem turned around and presented the Will stone being passed around. Rolling the marble-sized stone around in his fingers made him think back to his failed Will this morning. The way the stone seethed in his hand after only a small amount of water, water that churned so hotly that drops jumped out of the mug. This stone, which had summoned much more water, was still cool to the touch, as if it had never been used. He quickly passed it on to the next student.

"Correct!" She repeated what he said so the rest of the class could hear it and then continued. "So what about the cold water? When we Willed something hot, it resulted in a hot stone, but when we willed something cold, it also resulted in a hot stone. Why?"

Jommy began to raise his hand again, but Illem knew this one and shot his bruised hand into the air a foot higher than any other around him. The teacher recognized his eagerness and asked him for the answer.

"It isn't that you're Willing something hot that makes your stone hot, it's the difference in temperature," he answered. Mrs. Irptau made a motion with her hands for him to continue, so he added, "It produces a certain amount of heat to Will something, but it produces more heat to will something hotter or colder than the air around it. The greater the difference between the surrounding air and the substance you're Willing, either hot or cold, the more heat is produced in your stone."

Mrs. Irptau, apparently more perceptive than Illem had previously given her credit for, let up on her childish tone for her praise. "Excellent answer, Mr. Krarnehe, it sounds like you've been practicing at home. Is that what happened to your hands?"

Illem's face flushed red, but he answered. "Yeah... I Willed more than I could handle."

"It happens to us all," Mrs. Irptau declared, addressing the class again, "that is why you must be careful! The key to Will is balance!" Taking the two stones from her helpers, she thanked them and gave them permission to return to their seats.

She pushed the three glasses of water to the side of the table, returned the stones to the pouch and continued with her lesson. "Let's pick up where we left off on page fifty-two in A Children's Guide to Will."

The shuffling of books and flipping of pages led into the bulk of the lesson. The remainder of the class went as swiftly as the snow blowing outside the thirty-third story window. Otherwise boring discussions of temperature and Will were made enthralling by Mrs. Irptau blowing a hot wind through the class for a demonstration, or breaking a glass by freezing the water inside. They didn't discuss anything on a real chemical level (most of the students hadn't yet begun to study the periodic table, they'd have to wait until third grade for that), but nonetheless Illem and Jommy found the topic interesting enough to make them forget about the absence of their friend.

When it came time for the students to try out today's Will lesson themselves, the two friends always paired up. Illem would later reflect that it is much easier to learn a first and second language simultaneously, rather than one after another; it was often said that learning to use Will was like learning a new language that you couldn't hear. Together the two nine-year-olds practiced and practiced until they had it right, even if it took longer than their classmates. They'd adopt the focus position

Mrs. Irptau taught them to better concentrate on their Will, holding the stone between their palms and intertwining their fingers together tightly. Illem relaxed his grip a bit so as not to further bruise his already throbbing hands.

Occasionally, Illem would turn to see the man with the messy hair watching the proceedings of the class. He couldn't see what he wrote in his notebook, but it wasn't much. The man's tired brown eyes were locked attentively teacher. When he raised his pen to chew on it between notes, Illem saw that he didn't have a white chain on his wrist. This was the only place where that would be strange; everybody who worked at Will to Live seemed to have one.

If only his regular school day lasted ninety minutes and his Will lessons seven hours. Then at least the dragging pace of school wouldn't feel so long... Will lessons go too fast as it is, Illem thought as he returned his two textbooks to the storage cubby. Outside the only light left in the sky was provided by the adjacent office building; the stars in the sky and the lights on the ground were both obscured by the relentless snow.

Amidst children running in all directions and the noise of packing their things, the man with the messy hair approached Mrs. Irptau and they exchanged a few words. By the time Illem

got close enough to hear what was being said, all he caught was a polite "Thank you again" and the man left the room.

The youngsters lined up behind their teacher, the two nine-year-olds all the way in the back. Mern lined up in the middle, being six, and constantly chatted with his friends. With a rousing command and a bit of cheering from the youngest of the group, Mrs. Irptau marched the class in single file back to the entrance. Steve was there to call the elevators and help escort them out. As they waited for the final car, Illem looked around the blank entrance, but there was no sign of the man from class. It took three trips of full elevators to get them all down to the building's lobby. One by one, parents drove by in their cars to pick up their children, with Steve and Mrs. Irptau shooing kids through the door and slamming it shut before the snow could come in to warm itself. Once most of the class had gone, all that remained were Jommy and Illem, Mern and a handful of younger students, and Mrs. Irptau and Steve.

Only then did Illem realize that he was so entranced by the lesson that he had completely forgotten to ask about the incident in downtown. Smacking himself in the forehead dramatically, he rushed over to his teacher. She was talking to Steve about something school related, when Illem tugged on her sleeve.

"Can I help you, Illem? she asked when she looked down.

"I was supposed to ask you about something but I forgot, my dad's not here yet so I was wondering canIaskyouaboutitnow?" The words practically rocketed out of Illem's mouth.

Mrs. Irptau chuckled. "Of course you may. What's on your mind?"

He was practically shaking in his mittens. "Well, I was in school and I asked about what happened yesterday in downtown Sans but they said that we couldn't talk about it and anybody who brought in an article about it couldn't discuss it but I wanted to know if you could tell me what happened the men on the news said he used Will so my dad said to ask you since you know a lot about it and the school is only a few blocks away."

The wind kicked and whistled at the tall windows and the only light refracting through the crystal mobiles came from streetlights and fluorescent bulbs in the ceiling. Steve and the teacher looked at each other. Mrs. Irptau squatted down to be at eye level with Illem and placed her hand on his head.

"I can't really give specifics, dear, but a very bad man did use Will to hurt people. Will is a gift that everybody can use, but nowadays, not everybody learns to use it responsibly. Some people choose not to and some people are never given the choice. No matter the reason, what happened yesterday was a

tragedy and we need to be taking steps to teach people all we can about Will to prevent something like this from happening again." Just as she stood up, Gusan rolled up in his truck and honked. "Come on boys! Jommy! Mern! Your ride is here." Before Illem could get another word in, the three of them were rushed out the door into the cold and running for the warmth of the car.

Once they piled in and brushed off the snow, Gusan turned around. "How was class guys?"

"Awesome!" Mern sang.

"Pretty cool," Illem replied.

"Great, you can tell me all about it when we get home."

Mrs. Irptau and Steve waved from inside the door as Gusan pulled away from the building. Finally they were out of sight behind the white veil.

Illem spent the rest of the drive home in silence, deciding if he was satisfied with Mrs. Irptau's answer. Apparently the drive wasn't long enough for a question like that, because somewhere during his internal deliberations they arrived at Jommy's house. He pushed his thick glasses onto his face tightly as he climbed out of the car with a muted "Bye."

Illem called, "See you tomorrow," leaned over and slammed his door shut. The reminder that there was a friend in the car

made him think of the friend that wasn't. He wondered if Laron was angry that he couldn't go to Will school anymore. He hadn't seemed to be bothered by it in school that much, but Laron never seemed to be bothered by anything. His thoughts of Laron kept him busy for the short trip from Jommy's house to his own, and before long they pulled into the garage.

The smell of dinner permeated the cold garage, a smell made sweeter by Tashe's soft humming. Both man and boys barely took off their coats before hurrying to the table to eat their dinner; by the time Tashe had taken off her apron and sat down to join them, all of their plates were full of sliced steak, potatoes and seasoned rice. Illem's mother smiled as all three boys engaged their late dinners viciously, not even attempting conversation until the frenzy died down.

Once the flurry of forks and knives slowed, she addressed her children. "How was your day at school?"

"Gud," Mern said, mouth full of potatoes.

"Ok," Illem said, more polite than his brother.

Tashe turned her eyes on her husband. "And how was your day at school?"

Gusan swallowed the food in his mouth and replied, "Pretty good, I think. I had some interesting questions, although I

couldn't answer all of them." He made no intention to hide his looks at his eldest son.

Illem was quick to respond. "I just don't understand why they wouldn't let us talk about it."

"Talk about what," Tashe said more than she asked.

"What happened in downtown Sans yesterday," Gusan answered, "the school didn't want the kids getting the wrong idea."

An immature bitterness tinged Illem's tone. "The school didn't or the parents didn't?"

"Now Lem, I'm sure they had a good reason for it," Tashe said.

Gusan took the question more seriously. "Probably the parents, you're right. But the parents have the power to persuade the school, which is what happened."

Mern sat upright in his chair, watching his brother and parents and bobbing his fork up and down with his lips.

"But you guys use Will all day," Illem pressed, "so why would other parents want us to stop learning about it?"

"I don't know," Gusan said. "Maybe they're afraid. Maybe they don't use Will every day so they don't see how beneficial it can be. There are lots of people who get along just as well without it, so they might not see the point." Illem's father picked up his fork again and took another bite of his dinner. In

between chews he addressed his wife. "And how was your day, dear?"

"Busy!" Tashe said energetically. Most of their mother's time was spent in the car traveling to and from clients' houses. "I had to cancel one appointment because the roads down south were closed, but we rescheduled."

Gusan's voice faded as he returned to his food. "Good. That's good."

The conversation for the remainder of the meal consisted of dueling hums from Tashe and Mern, but Gusan and Illem, too consumed by consuming their late dinners, didn't seem to mind. Illem finished his second plate before his mother finished her first. He removed himself from the table with a "thank you for dinner, Mom" and put his dirty plate and utensils in the sink. He heaved his heavy book bag onto his back and marched upstairs to begin his homework.

He flicked on the light to his bedroom. Dark blue walls with stars and spaceship wallpaper ran around windows on two walls and a tall bookshelf on a third. Illem hurled his bag onto the foot of his bed, where he could easily reach it from his desk. All of his furniture was a dark wood with a shiny luster where it wasn't often used. The knobs and faces of the drawers, the tops of the bookshelves and the flat of his desk had all

lost their shine long ago from constant use and abuse, but as long as Illem's UFO light fixture in the center of the ceiling still worked, only his parents noticed.

In an effort to be studious, Illem unpacked the books he'd need for his homework onto his desk. Doing his homework was difficult enough on a normal day due to the multitude of distractions in his room and his fondness for succumbing to them. The toys, books and handheld video games that lined the shelves and filled the plastic storage bins on the floor all pulled him away from his work, a pull he didn't want to resist. Homework was even more arduous today due to distractions outside the bedroom.

From the window above his bed, Illem had a clear view of their expansive backyard, normally green right until the tall wooden fence. Under the bright light that flooded the yard, each pointed fence post wore a tiny white cap and a thick white skirt. The snow piled halfway up Illem's body now, deeper than he'd ever experienced before, and after a day of wishing to be inside and warm, he longed for nothing more than to be outside in the cold. The difference now, he would later reflect, is that being outside in the snow is better when you don't have anywhere else to be. When the snow is in the way of where you're trying

to go, it's a burden. But when the snow *is* where you're trying to go, that's when it really comes alive.

Illem looked at the books on his desk. He knew there wasn't any chemistry homework, the only homework he didn't mind doing (although he would never admit to actually enjoying it). Just another reason not to do homework, he told himself. It reminded him of school, and school reminded him of Mr. Smeuam, and Mr. Smeuam wouldn't give him any answers when he asked, and that left a bad taste in his mouth. He thought over his decision for a moment. Mom wouldn't let him play outside if his work wasn't done. Dad might, but it would take some convincing, and it wouldn't be for too long because it was already near his bedtime due to Will lessons. The nine-year-old reflected on a conversation about responsibility and trust he had had earlier in the month with his father. Begrudgingly, Illem pulled the chair away from the desk, sat down and did his homework.

Just as he finished, the light shining on the backyard clicked off automatically, the scenery outside doused in black and replaced by the snow near his window flitting in the glow of his UFO. He closed his books and piled them up, hanging his backpack over the back of his wooden desk chair. The floorboards in the stairs creaked more noticeably underneath as he descended, making his way to the kitchen for his pre-bed snack.

His mother had long since gone to bed but his father sat at the table drinking his nightly tea in a glass mug. Behind the steaming mug, two newspapers were laid out in front of him, his attention moving back and forth between them. The one on the left had oceans of text (far more than Illem wanted to read), but his eyes couldn't help being drawn to a picture of a burning car in a snow covered city street. The one on the right had a whole page covered by the same car from a different angle and "WILL TO BURN" emblazoned across the bottom in huge letters.

When Gusan noticed his son approaching, he raised up his head. "All done with your homework?"

Illem walked past and opened up the fridge. "Yup," he answered as he pulled out the milk. According to his trust discussion, he was allowed to take his own cookies, but only two at a time. He dared not push his luck with his father sitting right there. Illem took his allotment of cookies, poured himself a glass of milk and pulled up a chair at the table with his father.

"So how was your day?" His father asked.

Illem's golden waves came from his father's tight curls, but they sprang up in all directions where his father's seemed satisfied being simply round. Illem flicked some out of his eyes

even though he was staring at the table. "Ok. Can I tell you something? And you won't get mad?"

Gusan shifted in his seat to better face his son. "Sure, Lem, what's on your mind?"

Illem picked up his cookie and held it over his glass of milk. "I was really nervous to have you come speak in class today. I thought you were going to embarrass me," he admitted between dunks.

To his surprise, Gusan wasn't taken back. "That's understandable. If your grandfather ever came to speak at my school, I'd probably tear my hair out for days before."

Illem suffered a smile at the picture. "That's kinda what I did."

That made his father laugh. "To be honest, I'm sure I was more nervous than you were. I had a whole speech about the merits of Will and Will education lined up, but when I arrived in the morning they told me I wasn't allowed to talk about it. I had to talk about Will only how it related to my job, so I had to rewrite the whole thing on the fly. I was lucky they even let me mention environmental imbalance."

"Really? Mr. Smeuam wouldn't let us talk about it either."

"I could tell, but it's not his fault. I spoke to him for a few minutes while was waiting for you after school. He really

wants to discuss issues like that with you, but it's out of his hands."

Illem frowned. "He said the same thing in class."

"I hope he doesn't get in trouble for just saying so. It's a pretty frustrating position to be in." Gusan picked up his tea, the will stone at the bottom clinking softly against the side as he took a sip. "Did I? Embarrass you, I mean."

Illem shrugged. "A little bit... when you asked me that question."

"I figured I'd give you an easy one to get you off the hook."

"I know but..." he took a bite of his cookie. "It caught me by surprise, is all."

"Well, you know to pay attention in class, no matter who is speaking," Gusan said. With a big gulp, he finished the tea. The Will stone at the bottom rolled freely when he placed the mug back on the table.

This was the last thing Illem wanted to be talking about again, so he changed the subject. He asked his father, "Why do so many people think Will is so bad?"

Again, Gusan surprised his son with the lack of hesitation in his voice. "That's a really good question. I wish I knew the answer. They just don't understand it. Some people think it's

hurting the world and causing bad things to happen. Some people think that just because you can do bad things with it that we shouldn't teach it at all."

"What do you think?" Illem looked up at his father for the first time, having run out of cookies to eat.

"I think that Will is something that's been in our family for a long time. There's no proof yet that it hurts the environment or throws anything off balance. People have been using Will and sculpting more and more perfect Will stones since recorded history began. It's a part of who we are."

"Then why do you make hydrogen for people who don't use it, if it's so important?"

Gusan had to consider this for a moment and his answer was ultimately, "I can't control how or if people use Will, but that doesn't change the fact that people need what it can provide. Selling the hydrogen I summon at work lets me provide for you guys and your mother, so I don't mind doing it."

For the first time today, Illem felt satisfied with an answer he was given. He decided to press his luck. He pointed a finger at the picture of the burning car and asked, "What happened?"

Gusan's tone became serious. "You've learned about hydrogen in chemistry and how it's really light and flammable, right?"

"Yeah, on day one."

"What happens if you Will hydrogen into mid-air?"

"It floats away really quickly."

"What about oxygen?"

Illem pictured the box for oxygen, trying to remember its weight. "It's part of what air is made of, it's heavier than hydrogen."

"Pure oxygen is pretty flammable too, but you can't Will as much of it as you can hydrogen because it's sixteen times heavier." Gusan pointed at the picture in the paper, to a pit in the street where the snow had melted instantly away. "Whoever did this practiced using Will a lot. As far as investigators can tell, it looks like the killer Willed a huge ball of pure oxygen around himself and then lit it on fire with a lighter. The oxygen ignited and exploded, killing the bomber and lots of people around him."

A sense of sick wonder trickled down Illem's spine. "Why?"

"Nobody's figured it out yet. It was a pretty busy street. We don't know if one of the people killed was his target. We don't know if he even hit his target, although it's assumed that he did given the size of the blast." His finger on the picture moved to the glass building behind the crime scene; not a single pane of glass remained unbroken. "We may never know, really."

There hasn't been an attack like this in Sans in over a hundred and fifty years." Gusan closed the newspaper.

"That's why we couldn't talk about it..." Illem reflected.

Gusan's finger tapped on the picture with WILL TO BURN plastered on the bottom in huge block letters. "Some people think that the government putting tighter restrictions on Will education and use will stop things like this from happening. Others, like people at Will to Live, think that we need to start teaching about it in public schools again." Illem's look told his father to continue. "I think it needs to be taught. If this incident, as terrible as it was, gets Will more attention and back in schools, then at least some good will come out of it. We can only hope it goes that way."

A moment of uneasy silence washed over Illem for the final time that day. Once he sipped down the remainder of his milk, his father took his glass and the mug from the table, the Will stone jingling in the mug as he walked, and placed them in the sink.. Gusan ruffled up his son's hair and asked, "Did you get the explanation you wanted?"

Illem pushed away from the table and got up. "Yeah... thanks Dad."

Gusan smiled at the connection. "Anytime, Lem. Now, up to bed with you."

The wind outside raged like the thoughts in his head as Illem climbed the stairs. He pulled on his pajamas and recounted all that had happened during the day. His memories joined him in bed, but quelled as he did when he pulled the soft comforter over his body and wrapped his feet up in a bundle of warmth. The day's stresses faded like the light when he turned off the lamp on his bedside table. The final fleeting thought remaining in the inky darkness was a hope that his mother, when she awoke early the next morning, wouldn't realize he hadn't brushed his teeth before bed.