

Anaïs Nuñez – Tovar

*Heed My Warning*

10<sup>th</sup> grade

1986 words

Sunlight pours in from the open window adjacent my bed and hits the dark wood floors, where I spot a small, crumbled-up scrap of paper hiding by the crown molding. The curtains blow from the breeze outside and the morsel flutters across the floor and takes refuge under my bed. It's the first thing I see as I awaken, so I process it slowly. I rub my eyes, run a hand through my hair, and let my mind replay the memory. A scrap of paper. The Caretakers cannot tolerate even a dust bunny to be found in this house, so a scrap of paper, a disturbance in their obsessively clean and orderly environment, is a strange sight to me.

I hastily throw the covers off and get down to the floor, beginning to look for the small piece of college-ruled.

I find it immediately, it being the only thing in the desolate, dust-bunny-free expanse. Once I've snatched it away, I can't help but gawk at it in the palm of my hand before opening it. I've never found anything like this before. I unfold it carefully then peer down at the scrawled writing.

It's practically scribbles. I try to make out the words, and I think I've almost got it, but all the while I'm thinking how anyone could expect another person to decipher it. This person must have been in quite a rush but was for some reason still desperate enough to write it. Finally, I think I've made it out. It reads:

*get out now*

I do nothing but stare at it for a little while. My first instinct is to laugh it off, but then I think of where I am. The Caretakers tell me constantly that they intend to keep me safe and prevent me from being influenced by the bad people in this world - which is why I've never set a

foot outdoors - and they're careful not to allow anything unwanted to come into our home. So what's this piece of paper, urging me to run away from everything I know, doing here?

"K, breakfast is ready!" Sandra yells from downstairs, startling me.

Getting to my feet, I slide the scrap under my mattress then head downstairs, my mind still trying to make sense of the ominous note. Who could've written it? Maybe my Caretakers will know something. I'll have to tread carefully when I ask, though.

"Hey, Sandra, can I ask you something?" I ask when I sit down.

Sandra is one of my Caretakers, and compared to Erik and Carey, the other two, she's the most warmhearted. Erik is distant, always watching me, but I know he still cares. Carey is more laid back and is younger than Sandra and Erik, but is still plenty older than me.

Sandra sets down a plate of pancakes in front of me. She looks at me curiously, her brows furrowed. "What's up, K?"

I clear my throat. "Um, do you...do you know if anyone lived in this house before us?"

Sandra pauses from washing the dishes and turns to look at me, her expression suddenly serious. "No. No one has." Then she lightens up. "Such a strange question," she says with a laugh. "Why'd you think of it?"

"Oh. Uh, I don't know. Just curious," I mutter, then change the topic. "So where are Erik and Carey?" I ask.

"In the office. Lots of work to do. I'm going to be in their all day, too, but I'll set out lunch for you."

For the rest of breakfast I eat in silence, but when I turn to go, Sandra says, “Don’t forget to take your pills.”

“Of course not,” I respond as I start on the stairs.

“And K?”

I turn. “Yes?”

Sandra’s eyes bore into me. “Don’t go outside. And *don’t* come into the office.”

I almost roll my eyes. “C’mon, Sandra. Really? I know that already.”

The rest of my day carries on like any other. Exercise, play the violin, do my algebra, and finally write an essay on the classic I’m reading. But today I can’t get that note off my mind. What does it mean? What bothers me most is the question of who wrote it. Sandra denied anyone living here before us, so who was it? It nags at me to the point where I almost forget when it’s time for lunch. I go downstairs and eat quickly, then decide to take my meds upstairs so I can think more about the note. Unfortunately, I won’t have much time because I get tired usually after lunch and if I don’t decide to lay down, I’ll fall asleep wherever I am anyway.

When I throw back the pills, I see something tucked into the frame of a painting hanging above my bed, just barely peeking out.

Jumping onto my bed, I reach up and grab it with my fingernails. I don’t pause this time to admire it as a rarity. It doesn’t take me long to interpret the scribbles, either. *not what you think*, it says.

I blink. *What’s* not what I think? This makes even less sense than the last one.

I sigh and shift on my bed. I'm already started to feel sleepy, but I have to try to put some of the pieces together before I fall asleep. The notes are warnings, but what exactly are they trying to warn me *of*? Everything is perfect here. The Caretakers and I have no secrets between us. Nothing could really be *not what I think* it is. Right?

But as I start to drift off, one image rises in my mind. The office.

From the second I wake up my heart and mind are racing, as if all my speculation and trepidation was spreading through me as I slept. I wake up easily, leaping off my bed and stopping abruptly as I realize I'm not sure what to do. I begin to pace.

I can't just brush off these notes now. What was an alluring puzzle has become a looming threat to my security. It makes me angry. Everything was fine until I found those notes. Not only am I questioning everything now, but I'm so lost in all of the chaos of it that I can't find an answer to any of this. In the midst of my fleeting thoughts, it appears again.

The office.

It's inevitable, but I hate to disobey the Caretakers. However, I have the feeling I'll get an answer if I go to the office. It'll have to be at night when they're asleep.

"K, Sandra made dinner!"

It's Carey. The sound of his voice makes my stomach tighten. I start to feel guilty about what I'm going to do later.

Then, as I head to the door, I find another. I pick it out of the hinge on the door and open it slowly. I can read the handwriting effortlessly now, and what it says makes me dizzy.

*don't trust them*

“K, come on!”

In a dreamlike state, I tuck the note into my pants, then take my time down the stairs.

“There you are,” Carey says when I enter the dining room, all of the Caretakers looking up at me.

“You doing okay? You seem upset,” Carey says, looking at me worriedly.

“I’m fine,” I mutter. From the corner of my eye I see Erik staring at me.

I eat the meal just fine, but the last note is fresh in mind. I don’t know if I can wait to go to the office. I need to know the truth. All of this is just too strange. Unable to take it anymore, I decide to go now.

“May I be excused?” I ask, and they look at me oddly. I never break the daily routine.

“Of course,” Sandra says after a few seconds, smiling softly.

I walk out casually, but the second I’m out of sight I race to the office. The door is locked, no surprise, but I pick it with a bobby pin that I slip from my hair.

Walking in to the office, heart pounding, I expect to find something menacing, but it is only an ordinary office space. A desk with three chairs placed around it, a file cabinet, and a computer. My heartbeat begins to slow.

After a few moments I see a clipboard resting on the desk. I hurry over to it and scan the first page.

*Project 150*

*“In a world plagued by violence, inequality, illiteracy, where every man looks out for himself, the human race has come to resemble that to which they live amongst: animals. At Project 150 the goal of every Caretaker is to preserve the minds and bodies of the world’s most intelligent youth. With rigorous routines comprising education, intense exercise, and development in the arts, Project 150 will lead those selected to fulfill the human race’s true potential.”*

- *Erik Samuelson*

My breath catches in my throat. Erik? I look below the quote to see a chart and I assume, reluctantly, that it refers to me, because the letter ‘K’ is on top. But where’s the rest of my name, the –ay? I don’t look at the chart because I know I don’t have time. I lift the page and see another chart, the first column filled with the letters of the alphabet. The row that starts with ‘K’ is highlighted, and next to the letter is a name.

*Josephine Santiago*

Could she be the one who wrote the notes? But I must move on, and next I raid the file cabinet. In the first drawer I find a bottle of blue pills. The label reads:

*TABLET X-0135*

*Administer two, once a day for progressive deterioration of the long-term memory. May cause drowsiness.*

The bottle falls from my hand as I start to shake and my head starts to hurt. I've seen enough already, but my question still isn't answered. Something inside me takes charge and continues on.

I move to the computer and find it requires a password. On a whim I try "Caretaker." By a miracle I'm let in, but then I hear someone yell from the dining room. They'll be expecting me back soon, so I must hurry.

I don't know what I'm looking for, though. Footsteps grow louder from beyond the office door and in a desperate act I click on a random file. A collection of videos comes up and I realize they're security footage.

"K, where are you?" Sandra yells. She's close.

"If you're in the office, we *will* find you," Carey says.

I click on the first video. A girl appears in the very room I'm sleeping in now.

"K, are you in here?" asks Carey.

The girl is tearing a sheet of paper and scribbling on the pieces hurriedly.

Banging comes from the office door and my head is pounding to the same quick rhythm. The Caretakers are shouting my name, but I don't really hear them.

She's hiding the bits of paper around the room now and there's banging and yelling coming from the girl's closed door, too.

My mind feels like it's slowly being torn apart as I live in a moment all too similar to the one I'm watching, like I'm trapped in a room of mirrors. The more I watch, the noise of the Caretakers a distant reality, the more I begin to think this girl looks kind of like me.

We have the same hair, same figure.

Then she turns and I see her face.

The people burst into the girl's room, and I hear the door to the office being thrown open at the same time.

The girl...She's...

The Caretakers wrap their arms around me and drag me off the chair, away from the screen.

The girl...

It –

It was me.