

“Mossy Green”

Payton Rackley

10th Grade

1,998 words

Today. *April 18th, 2079.*

Waiting, Edith shifted her toes in the sand.

Don't be afraid.

The ocean had always been her solace; it was something unpredictable in a life of ragged circles and predictability because water was the one element people had yet to tame—it was just as unpredictable as it was wild, always spinning, churning beneath a dimmed sun. Edith had read once that the ocean had been blue at some point, that marine life had once teamed and glowed in the shallows and in the waves that crashed against the rocks, but if it had once been blue, the time had long passed; it hardly succeeded *green* now, a mossy, shaded green that was easily the prettiest color she had seen.

Remember this.

The foam that spluttered at the sand was tinted dark and it stuck to Edith's ankles as it rushed up and against her legs. She didn't bother to brush it away; it smelled of salt and of home and she let it be as she watched the tide come in again. The sand was still a pretty shade, more yellow than it had been when she was young, but familiar in the way it clumped with the water. It was a stark contrast to the girl's tanned skin and to the splotch of black ink that was settled beneath her wrist.

The mark.

Don't be afraid.

Edith was trying to ignore it, the tattoo that had been sketched into her skin since she was young. Small and neat, the dark numbers on her wrist were hardly noticeable, and yet, she couldn't look away. Everyone in her society carried one, a mark of thick, black ink that was fit

right across his or her left wrist, centered squarely beneath his or her index and pointer finger. Six, short numbers pinned with a needle at the age of two.

Edith had been unafraid of the numbers on her wrist for a long time. They were unique to each person and weren't shared commonly between others; bracelets and wristbands and watches were often snapped in place above the markings to keep them hidden. The six unique numbers on everyone's skin were kept secret. Usually.

The sea was loud and soft as Edith tilted her head to glance at the worn bracelet wrapped around her arm. It had once hidden the numbers, but now they were bared to the sun, oddly pale compared to the rest of the girl's dark and tanned skin. She reread the ink for the umpteenth time and then shoved her hand off of her knees, shaking her head.

"Stop *worrying*, Edith," she said quietly, hiding her fingers in the sand. The sun had begun to set, unleashing a glowing, pale orange unto the unsettled waves of the sea, leaving the offing in a haze of pinks and yellows. "*Stop.*"

But now she *was* afraid.

The markings on her wrist detailed the day she was to die.

Everyone knew the day he or she would die; it had been tattooed on wrists and engraved in skin in a thick ink that wasn't avoidable forever, no matter how hard it was ignored. Six numbers, clear as day, printed to ensure the government had the most power and that fear could be struck if need be. Cruel, harsh—the numbers glared out and were kept from a nosy society.

Edith ran a pair of fingers across the slightly raised skin on her wrist. She could feel the numbers beneath her fingertips; the tattoo was a part of her now, had been for fifteen years, but it still sent chills down her spine. It still sped her heart up and sent her blood racing. Her pointer finger paused to trace carefully over the numbers she already had memorized.

Zero, four. One, eight. Seven, nine.

Today. *April 18th, 2079.*

She'd have to report to the building now, the one that all the people with expectant expiration dates went to. They said goodbye to their family, swept up all of their belongings, and then made the descent to the overly-extravagant building that was topped with a neon, flashing sign and dozens of tinted windows. It was supposed to be pleasant, the dying; a great deal of people looked forward to a party in their name and went happily. A person's death was celebrated with cakes and poppers the morning after.

But how could dying be *that* pleasant? It couldn't be as nice as the way the ocean was in the morning, the way it splashed at the rocks and at Edith's toes. It couldn't be as nice as the way the sand was just cool enough to lie in if she hurried before classes, the way it felt familiar and yet it didn't, warm and smooth and unpredictable. And it certainly couldn't be as nice as the way the water curled across her skin if she was lucky enough to slip away and into the ocean's embrace, water all around her, the salt in her hair, on her tongue, across her skin and the waves lapping at her nose and her cheeks as she tried with little difficulty to keep herself afloat.

The sun was setting faster now and Edith knew she had to go.

A note to self, she thought as the sun lit a glow of melted orange and twisted yellows across the water, *remember this. Not the black mark or the needle in your arm. Look back on this.*

Her mouth was dry as she stood, her hands lingering in the water, the foam still fizzing against her ankles. There were no words for her to say then, nothing left to say goodbye to; her family had already wished her off with tears and a handkerchief made of satin. Edith let her bare feet sink into the sand for a moment more, her hair rustling around her face, the salt heavy in her

nose and in her mouth, and then she turned to the path that lead up shore. The sea continued to rush the sand, but she knew she'd never see it again. She waited until the sun was long gone to leave and she knew she was running out of time.

Edith walked with little purpose and a darkness spread quickly across the patterned and emptied streets. The streetlights were barren and glowed with a dusky, glinted light that was uncomfortable and unfamiliar. She glanced at the tattoo and grimaced; it shone under the glare from the passing lights.

By the time she stood before the building, the streets had cleared entirely and she was alone—the moon had risen to the center of the sky and her feet ached, calloused from her time in the gardens and in the sea. Her hands shook as she approached the yellow light that spilled from beneath the door. A digital clock sat above the doorframe, enclosing a centered, steel door with space for scanning wrists and space for a speaker. The clock read a little before midnight—seven minutes, exactly—and Edith knew she should be hyperventilating, should be crying and begging on the doorstep.

She glanced to the moon for the last time and took a step towards the door.

Something hurtled from the side of the door—where, she couldn't say—and caught her around the middle, tackling her to the cement and rolling off from the light. Edith yelled out as her left side hit the ground, her teeth clenched on impact.

Her eyes snapped open and she glanced up into eyes of mossy green.

“I'm here to help,” was the first thing the eyes said, and Edith realized her arms were pinned over her head, her face dangerously close to the boy who had knocked her to the ground. She seriously doubted that he had anything nice to contribute to her last six minutes of life.

“Oh, *come on*,” Edith said, shaking her head and peering up at the boy who had tilted his head to look at her, his arms outstretched over her. “I already *have to die*. What do *you* want?”

“For you to live,” the boy said breathlessly and for some reason, he smelled like the ocean. He took one look at her expression and then scrambled to his feet, his arms and legs a mess of clumsiness and disorientation. “Sorry.” He frowned. “Are you hurt?”

Edith scowled for a moment before hurrying to her feet and whipping around, her eyes searching for the clock above the door. She was hidden away in the darker part beside the door, but the reading of the clock still startled her. Four minutes. *Look back on the sea*.

“Look, I *really* have to go—”

“*No!* Don’t go, just—just wait a minute, alright?” The mystery boy tilted his head again and he looked vulnerable that way, his cheeks flushed, his clothes utterly ruined and crumpled against his thin frame. His eyes were bright and still looked like the sea. “You need to see something.”

“And you really don’t want to see what’s about to—”

He scoffed, his hand reaching for hers. Edith recoiled instinctively, but he was careful and pulled her hand so her tattoo was clear in the light, shining in the artificial yellow glow. The black numbers gleamed.

“*That’s* nothing to be afraid of,” he said, and his mouth turned into a crooked smile. Holding her hand in the reflections, the boy twisted his own fingers so that his wrist was upright. The ink on his skin was neatly packed together and his numbers shone too, lilted and sad in the light.

Edith gasped.

Zero, four. Two, six. Seven, six.

April 26th, 2076.

The clock on the wall struck midnight, buzzing briefly and then shutting off, the lights disappearing, leaving the pavement in the cool white light of the stars. Edith's head snapped up and her eyes locked in on the empty wall, the barren street, the glow of the moon. Her glare flickered back to the numbers on her wrist, the ones that marked her death for *yesterday*, and the boy's numbers next to hers, the ones that marked his death for *three years ago*, and her head spun.

The boy gripped her arm a bit tighter when she glanced up at him, her eyes widened. He gave her a tentative smile, shifting his weight to one foot before grinning sheepishly. "I—"

"*Explain*," she demanded, her heart still racing, eyes narrowed.

"Long story short, we don't really die based on these stupid things."

"Oh really? Thanks for clarifying."

He gave her a pointed look. "It's a *scam*." The boy gestured to the building, which lead upwards like a skyscraper and nearly kissed the sky itself, several floors headed up. "Haven't you noticed something? About all these *numbers*?" He scoffed. "You're seventeen, right? That's when most people have their expiration dates. You go in that building, they laugh at you because you're terrified out of your own head, and then you become a slave to some rich guy over the town-lines."

"But my parents—"

"Would actually die if they went in," he finished. "They have make it believable somehow."

Edith stared for a moment. She stared, opened her mouth to speak, and then snapped it closed, her words much more than lost. When she finally found words, she bit at her lip and then asked him. “So...what do we do about it?”

“Well,” he said, beginning his walk back from where Edith came: towards the sea.
“First, we catch a boat.”

“And then?”

He grinned. “Then we change the world.”

Edith turned her head to where she knew the ocean was waiting and then caught the boy’s eyes: utterly, mossy sea-green. *Remember this*. The way his eyes glinted reminded her of all her silly notes to self and she shook her head as she realized. *Don’t be afraid*. Maybe they were worth it.

She took a deep breath.

Mossy green stared back.

Remember this.