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English IV - Writing

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The Free Citizenry

A trumpet martialed in the day, and the sun started to glint over the mountains. The line of adobe duplexes had aged into yellow, stone streets resting in a lazy dust.

A muffled gunshot sounded a ways off.

In the second house on Murray Street, there was a woman who’d already been awake. She woke up after her husband had already left for work at the News Uniformium. She had light brown skin with liver spots, and her hair was oily and graying. She kept her mouth curled against her jaw, in a tight knot that gave nothing away. Not that she had anything to hide, but expression had no appeal to her. The nightgown she was wearing was close to losing all of its blue, but over the left breast it still carried the golden snake coiling a bundle of sticks. The trumpet tipped her out of reverie. She had been ironing her clothes, but at that moment decided to start with breakfast.

The cupboard was filled. She absently pulled a packet of gruel that had a photo of a boy with a gumdrop smile and the words *Victory Meal* on it. There was also a powdery dust covering the surface of the packet; it smelled industrial, that nondescript quality of being slightly burnt. After a while of heating her breakfast, the gas turned off and she poured it into her bowl.

The mass came halfway up the bowl. It modeled the lumpiness of cement, but its texture was dry and gelatinous. She had to pause between every couple of bites to scrape it off the roof of her mouth with her tongue. Outside the window, there were crows squawking. She saw a procession of schoolchildren pass the street. They were all wearing uniforms and looking straight ahead. She felt happy for them.

After finishing her breakfast, she went back to ironing.

Her ear tuned towards the radio; it was like a biological rhythm. There was a program on at this time that she enjoyed that opened with the anthem. The first note of the trumpet gave her a small push. It was a little check of validation, and it warmed her. And the rest of the melody followed as the story she was living, a story that she had decided would give her reassurance, one which she learned to comfortably close her eyes and rest in. The morning announcer came on after the music.

“Hello, Americans! Of far and wide, we welcome you to our program! I am Brett Arendt, and I’ll be your host.

“Developments in the African-American War abound. Our loyal citizens of the Regal Infantry have been deployed in Northern Mississippi, and expect a confrontation with the African American opposition. There’s been a strong surge of army registration in these past months: twenty percent of our country’s young men have been inspired by the words of Murray, our gracious leader, and have taken to registering en masse. I think this is—I really think this is the most we’ve seen since the Ukranian War half a century ago.

“I really just want to personally commend all of the great fighters on the battlefield. You can see they’ve really internalized what they’re fighting for, they know what it means to be a proud citizen, they are—I don’t know if you’ve seen that photo of members of the Freedom Battalion on William’s Front. It’s a photo of those proud young men standing stiff along their sergeant’s stiff gaze, and they’re all beaming.

“It’s photos like these that help remind us what our Writers wanted, those who pressed the Agreement of Free Citizenry years ago. They said that it is our duty to protect our liberty to the end, and come what may. These men are reminding us to weed out the internal insurgencies that want our country to collapse. To those men, we deeply thank you.

“Wow. A lot to be proud of. In other news…”

Outside, damp papers tumbled down the street. There were posters on tall and wide billboards with caricatures of national enemies. A foreign diplomat who’d been sent by his country’s intelligence agency to undermine our economy had been drawn with saucer eyes and a giraffe neck. A local citizen who was responsible for charging a slanderous witch hunt against the esteemed leader was drawn with a tall head, and serpentine eyes. He’s been cari—

“Report to Kolbek Arch at 7-2! Report to Kolbek Arch at 7-2!”

Ah, this is the neighborhood’s information broadcast system. It’s the way leaders keep citizens informed on their business and on local happenings. It also summons citizens to attend community gatherings and consensus workshops.

A reflexive glance up in the air, and she walked over to the bathroom to start showering. The shower came on at a refreshing, cool temperature, and shut itself off after five minutes.

She dressed in more formal clothes, and took her purse, intending to heed the command, but she was interrupted by a knock on her door. Knowing no better, she answered.

At the door was a lank and sheepish man, who wore an apology for a hat. His eyes were neither brown nor hazel. Certainly not blue. His mouth was curt and slim, his legs were made long by his tight slacks, and his whole figure was doing a disservice to his spine.

“Um, I— Can I come in?”

She darted her eyes, and the corners of her mouth curved downwards. She had never met this man before. For a moment she wondered if he was one of the informers, but decided against it, judging by his clothes.

She half-shook her head while closing the door, but he held his hand out.

“No, please. Can I talk with you?”

She looked at him with wide eyes, her teeth almost gripping her bottom lip. She shut the door quickly, but quietly, and waited for him to pass.

She tried to block out the man knocking on the door, yelling for her to let him in. He was incessant, she thought. After two minutes or so, he stopped talking. Presuming he had left, she gathered her belongings and pulled out of the door.

Walking from the 2nd quarter, she saw the brown arch coming into view. Approaching the building, a spot of sunlight carried itself over the length of its edge. A puddle on the ground had reminded her of the war. She couldn’t think of the connection, but picturing the young soldiers made her feel cozy, and with that thought in her mind, she walked through the golden threshold.

Inside the building, there was a quiet, mid-morning reception. A yellow table of pamphletry and small water bottles stretched the length of the main room. An overhead PA announced that the discussion would begin in five minutes.

The auditorium was modestly filled. There were young adults excitedly chattering among themselves. She didn’t much like their antics; she had learned to treasure a more selective network of socialization. Her husband, and a few friends from her exercise class.

The speaker came on stage. Ardice Hampton: she was a delight, an exemplar of these gatherings. Her voice projected like a brave trumpet. Standing at her podium, she spoke like she was the beacon of the future. The middle-age wife always felt rejuvenated hearing from young adults who speak of their country with such bravery and providence. Ardice always liked to talk about the cost of liberty. That’s how she began her speech:

“Hello, I’m really glad you all could come. You’ve all been invited here to be reminded of the passion of our Free Citizenry. It is such a blessing to live among people who are willing to set aside their needs, to set aside their family and friends, to set aside their lives, to protect the great value we evangelize: freedom.”

This met strong applause.

“Every day, I am inspired more and more by the valuable and honorable citizens who can root the insurgents. Just earlier this week, we read in the news report about the baker, Jacob Mann, who had spread shameful libel against our Father!”

In the back of her throat you could hear her voice choke. Shouts were audible from the audience.

“To everyone in this room, I am here with you! I understand! It is a fortuitous battle we fight every day to protect ourselves from such disgrace, but I want to assure you, from the very bottom of my heart, and with every last drop of humanity I’ve saved for my country, I am with you! We will defeat them as one!”

Her words drew the crowd into ovation.

She continued her speech, drawing upon anecdotes, and inviting audience members up to share their passion for their country. After the gathering, many elderly women came up to Hampton, quietly smiling, to shake her hand and tearfully share their stories. The wife felt a touch of inspiration, as she usually did, and so grabbed a couple of the pamphlets that were offered, talking some with the young representatives standing at the other end of the table.

On her walk back home, she noticed the sky cast a sulky mood, and followed the slim awning on the right side of the streets to shade herself. Rain came in a short while, compelling her to pace faster. It was a strong downpour by the time she got to her house. She spun quickly into the door, closing it shut behind her. In turning around from the door, she noticed the sorry man sitting on her couch. She almost jumped, but he quickly hopped up from the chair he was sitting in.

“Please, let me stay here.”

She started at him rigidly, moving her jaw.

“I—I really need your sympathy. I—”.

He came close, but she took aback.

“Can I confide in you?”

Her face turned pale. “What?”

He slouched marginally, in relief, but his voice sank to a quiet, anxious half-sobbing. “I’m being persecuted. I don’t know why! I’ve always loved Murray’s leadership, and I’d speak nothing against him! I—I don’t know what else to do! Your door happened to be open, and I need to stay here. You’re the only one who can know now. Can I hide out in your home and let them pass?”

The blood returned to her face. She looked at him blankly, and then pressed the emergency dial on her living room wall.

In an instant, he fled from the house. She closed the door behind him and crouched in front of it, reminding herself to lock it next time. A gunshot sounded a few seconds later, but she tried to hear the trumpet in her head.