

*Do I Dare?*

Three days had passed since Erica last heard her sister's thoughts.

She looked about at her surroundings. The mourners exited the cemetery, picking through the graves, careful not to disturb the dead. They turned, giving one last sympathetic glance to the family before continuing on with their day.

Some old traditions held on, especially when it came to funeral rituals. Most people wore black, casserole dishes were exchanged. The cemetery nested in the heart of the city, as if the dead decided amongst themselves that this was their town, and the living were forced to flee to the suburbs. Old gravestones, covered in moss and illegible, were broken down and dilapidated next to new graves. Erica assumed this was because of the recent deaths; they must be causing a spacing issue.

Flowers were deemed unnecessary by an unspoken rule; we could all hear each other's thoughts of sympathy, should we choose to tune into them. She could hear that such things were comforting to her mother, appreciated by her father. Erica chose to tune out. They weren't sincere.

*He will be demoted for this, surely.*

*Her sister better turn out better than that one.*

*Why didn't they intervene?*

Erica heard a few car doors shut, quietly, respectfully. She wished to join them, to escape, but she was stuck on the receiving end of those falsely sympathetic glances. Her mother sobbed next to her, and her father stared straight ahead, holding her mother's hand, looking braver than Erica knew he felt. Tyler was bored, detached from his current surroundings.

Erica understood that if it wasn't for her father's rank as Head Information Enforcer, the only attendees at this funeral would have been immediate family; Erica, her mother and father, and her younger brother Tyler.

Deaths like these were usually kept quiet. She had heard rumors of secret burials performed at night, on so called private properties, with only the parents attending, serving as mourners, pall bearers, and grave diggers. As a military family, this wasn't an option. There could be no hushing the death of an Information Enforcer's daughter, definitely not under these circumstances. A government man in charge of prosecuting the anarchists, and his daughter turns out to be one of them. The irony of the situation was not lost on Erica. The only hope Erica's father had was that the public would embrace them, that they would seem more human because of this loss. The anarchists might target them because of this, or they may empathize and leave them alone. Both sides knew that these types of losses were becoming all too common.

She stared down at the casket, a deep red color painted on cool steel, an imitation of red cherry wood. The casket was closed, but she could visualize her sister's face: soft and childlike, the mix between a porcelain doll and a beauty queen, her hair jet black compared to Erica's sandy blond. Katelyn had taken after her father in that regard, though that was where their similarities ended. Two years older, she was everything that a little sister would admire, be jealous of, and eventually fear. She excelled in school, both academically and socially. She was the head of her class, president of the academic team, homecoming queen, and started a humanitarian club, sharing her love of reading to children. She was the perfect daughter, and Erica spent most of her childhood hating her.

Katelyn had developed early, she commanded attention, and this was part of the problem. Boys noticed her. And regardless of the antiprivacy laws, boys wanted her.

Just a few generations ago, a teenage girl “got a reputation” for what she did. Since the government intervened, girls got reputations for lesser offenses. Now they were whispered about, punished, for what they thought- even if these ideas weren’t acted on. A person is encouraged from birth to train their thoughts to avoid such trouble. Your actions are being watched, and your thoughts are being overheard. This was meant to shift the country back into morality, albeit forced. A sense of safety is implied when you can hear your neighbors thoughts, like a low humming radio, background noise. It got easier to tune in and out of once a child turned eight or nine. The constant bombardment of other people’s thoughts became less confusing, more of a comfort.

Katelyn had not succeeded in training her thoughts, and recently, she had lost some of the skill it required to ignore the thoughts of others. When they were younger, she practiced listening in on Erica, tried to tune into every thought that passed in her mind. She teased her relentlessly. If Erica had a crush on a boy at school, Katelyn made sure everyone knew about it. Maybe this was why it was so impossible to tune out thoughts when she was older. She seemed overwhelmed by them. She hadn’t been sleeping. She and Erica had frank conversations about this. All there was to be had was a frank conversation. Anyone that lied, anyone that avoided the truth... well, what was the point?

Erica tried to help her sister. They practiced. Katelyn would attempt to busy her own mind with other topics than the nonsensical things Erica was focusing on, but this only seemed to make things worse. She found no peace.

She knew the disgusting things boys thought about her as she walked down the hallway at school. She got the same mental image as they did when they pictured doing things to her. She told her mother about this, she went to the guidance counselor and complained about not feeling safe. Their responses were discouraging. They told her there was no reason to report such innocent behavior. Everyone assured her that it was perfectly normal for boys to think these things about her, that she shouldn't worry, that she was still perfectly safe. She should feel flattered that she was pretty enough to get this type of attention. This was not the response Katelyn wanted to hear, and she began to change.

She became quieter, more withdrawn, but her thoughts became louder. Focused on impossible, punishable, fatal things. On running away, on removing her chip, on creating a program that would destroy everyone else's chips. Fantastical ideas about the way "things used to be," a time that Katelyn and Erica never knew.

They had read plenty about it in school. People had one night stands, diseases. There were perverts who preyed on kids, and no one knew this unless they were caught. There were schemes against neighbors, against the entire nation. War profiteering, money laundering, drug deals. The country was immoral.

Then the government fought back. While still upholding freedom of speech, the assumed law: freedom of privacy, began to dwindle. The word privacy was associated with secrecy, immoral acts, fear. Katelyn read that this was not always so, but the very thought made her skin crawl. The Department of Information Enforcement and Antiprivacy developed first. They were founded on the principles of keeping the general public safe from the few "nut jobs" out there. They monitored Internet use, kept record of suspicious activity. Anyone deemed a threat because

of his or her private activity was tried, and found guilty. Eventually they stopped conducting the trials.

It was too much to monitor, and the nation turned to big business to dig them out of this hole. The nation's leading computer developer produced the Control Unit of Information Privacy (or *Chip*, as though it was more convenient to spell unit with an 'h'), and within twenty years every baby had one implanted.

Chips are issued at six months of age. Installing them is a simple, outpatient procedure. Its about as painful as a bee-sting, the babies wail for a few minutes, and usually the mothers are the ones that have it the hardest. But they know its for the greater good, that this way their child will grow up to be honest, compassionate, and empathetic. Hearing the thoughts of other people's pain makes you tender. Besides, there was no way of arguing it.

Every personal and informational record is stored on a person's chip. Social security numbers, credit card information, bank accounts. And all thoughts are transmitted, heard by those in close proximity to you, monitored by The Department of Information Enforcement and Antiprivacy.

This was the department their farther worked for, and their grandfather before him. They were a reputable family, but that was probably ruined. Katelyn had been compromising her family's status for awhile. Erica loved her sister, but she was scared of her. Scared of her wild thoughts, her rebellious nature. Scared of what their father would do. Nervous that she would be guilty by association, and worried that her sister would stop confiding in her for these fears. Her parents tried to ignore Katelyn's thoughts. Not to draw too much attention to them, not to encourage her by showing their fear. *Teenagers go through phases like this.* It was just a phase.

Katelyn had to know what a danger she was placing on her family by removing her chip. She knew it wouldn't work. Now she was going to be written off as a mere statistic, another "final act of rebellion committed in teenage adolescence," or worse yet, people would forget about her all together. She was the fourth teenager this month, the twenty-first since the school year started. It was hard for teenagers.

Erica turned the phrase over inside her head once more the: final act of rebellion committed in teenage adolescence. That didn't seem fitting at all. *Why did everything have to be jazzed up, scientific, exclusive sounding?* A sharp ring in Erica's ear sent a tingle down her spine. She knew thoughts like that were frowned upon. It was better to take all information for fact and never doubt or question anything. Doing so too much would cause her chip to betray her. A sharp tingle down her back or a ringing in her ear was a slap on the wrist. It did not compare to imprisonment, or the rumors she had heard... of more serious consequences. She would have to keep her thoughts in control when they drifted to her sister.

Still, there was no denying it was quite a mouthful, "suicide," summed it up, while leaving out the gory details.

Her sister had operated on herself alone; examining the chip at the nape of her neck proved that fact definitive. Some teenagers did it in packs, a science experiment turned wrong. *Imagine what life could be like if we could think freely,* they convinced one another. *No one watching our actions.* Thoughts like these became romanticized, as if they never heard the research, as if they didn't know about the way things had once been. The identity theft, the terrorism, rapes, murders. They must have seen the reports. Some believed them, thinking that they were smarter than those unfortunate victims. They would have luck on their side. And others simply thought that the stories were made up, That there were tribes of people, living

on the outskirts of society, living free- whose thoughts, actions, emotions, and ideas belonged to themselves alone.

If these privacy rebels were identified, they were imprisoned. Those not identified, well, Katelyn was now one of them.

For a lot of teenagers, the issue simply came down to the shame of sex. Before the privacy laws were enacted, teenagers had an easier time sneaking about, touching and groping each other in the dark. The only fear of getting caught was being seen. That fear was still there, but now you had to worry about your thoughts being overheard, recorded, and reported. For the past ninety years, this was the case.

Erica had to turn her thoughts from this. Thinking too much about what the government created and why could not be a good idea, and she did not need any more attention on her at the moment. She was the one that found Katelyn's body, lying face down in a pool of blood. Her once beautiful sister had slumped over in an unnatural way on her arm. Her body looked broken, like a contortionist that bent in a frightening way. She was completely topless, Erica guessed she was trying to preserve her clothing. Her hair was pulled back, and the blood had started to mat and harden at the nape of her neck.

Before examining her hairline, Erica knew what had happened. There was a box cutter on the counter. A bottle of rubbing alcohol was spilled out next to it. The mixture of the alcohol and blood gave the room a sharp, metallic smell. If Erica thought about it too much, she would gag. She breathed through her mouth as her eyes began to water.

The cut to the back of her neck, the loss of blood, Katelyn would have survived that. She might not have even needed stitches. A black, tar- like substance drained from her wound. This substance is known as Expulsion, it happens when a chip is destroyed. When the recorded

thoughts leak out of your head. When these thoughts and chemicals betray your body. This is what killed her sister.

Katelyn had removed her chip. Erica had heard her sister thinking about it, but she could have never guessed she would go through with it. She must have made an impulsive decision. If Katelyn had time to plan, Erica was sure that she would have known; she would have heard. But Katelyn had become easier for Erica to tune out. Her thoughts were racing, full of anxiety: over being bad, over boys, over her hatred for her father and the job he did. It was too exhausting, and Erica had to tune out.

*But if I hadn't, I might not have found my sister's lifeless body on the bathroom floor.*

Erica had backed out of the room slowly. She longed to flip her sister over, to take one more look at her face, but she knew by doing so she would be prosecuted, and her family was going to be under enough scrutiny by Katelyn's actions. Touching a dead body of any kind was punishable now. There had been issues. People stealing chips off of the body, erasing them. There had been murders, people trying to destroy those with "evidence" against them; someone that overheard a thought that had not been controlled.

To touch a dead body was to tamper with evidence. It was to admit guilt, whether you were or not. It was the strictest law the country had. To stroke the face or close the eyes of a loved one made you a murderer.

There was a Body Disposal Team for deaths. They were to be called immediately. By law, Erica had to call them even before called her parents. So, that's what she did. And she waited.



The team removed Katelyn's body before their parents got home. They made sure it was a quick process. No unauthorized persons were permitted to be on the property when a removal was taking place. Not even someone of their father's rank could gain entrance.

Erica had watched the team from across the street. They stretcher jostled down the porch. There was no need to be careful with the body, stuffed inside a thick black bag. Her sister's thoughts were silenced.

When the funeral was over, the family proceeded to the car. Katelyn would have asked to drive home. *She needed the practice, she was in no way ready for her license test.* Erica turned off this thought. She instead forced her attention on the trees as they passed by her window.

Every few minutes she would lose focus and hear her mother's thoughts. They came in as a steady stream of bleak and sorrow. *My firstborn.*

The rest of the family made plans for that afternoon. Her father was taking Tyler to a Future Leaders meeting. Erica was not sure if this was a requirement for government men to join with their sons, or if it was "encouraged," but Erica knew the intention was to mold Tyler into a clone of her father. He would follow in his footsteps. His thoughts were angry, ashamed, and determined to prove to his friends at school that his family was not a part of the anarchist uprising. He was glad Katelyn was gone.

Erica's mother did not often attend these meetings, but today it seemed fitting. The whole family needed to save face, to prove their loyalty. Instead of thinking about the loss of her daughter, Erica's mother spent most of previous day forcing her mind into empty thoughts, meaningless tasks. She busied herself preparing pies and cakes to take to the meeting. *How very American.*

Erica's ear rang.

After her family had scurried about, changed out of their funeral clothes, and rushed out the door, Erica found herself alone in the house, and alone with her thoughts. She walked down the hallway and headed to her room. She passed by Katelyn's room. The door had only been opened once, to find proper clothes for burial. *Maybe I should start cleaning it up, make things easier for my parents.* She didn't want her sister's clothes, but she knew her mom would make her take them. They would hang in the back of her closet, and every now and then, when she was rummaging through things, she would touch a sweater or dress of Katelyn's, and she would be reminded of what was missing.

Erica was hit suddenly with blind, gut wrenching grief. It surrounded her, consumed her; she was drowning in it. She started to sob violently. Quickly her nasal passages swelled and she was gasping and choking through her mouth. Before she knew what she was doing she was in the bathroom. *Where Katelyn took her last breath. Her last thoughts. Did she think about me?*

It was too much. Erica sank to the floor. *This is where I found her.* She remembered her sister's body, contorted inhumanely. She tried mimicking the position. The cool floor felt soothing against her burning cheeks.

Her tears subsided and her breathing became less rapid. She closed her eyes and let her whole body sink into the floor.

Erica woke up slowly. Her eyes adjusted to the dark room, but she instantly knew where she was. She was never going to forget this spot. Her eyes focused in under the sink. Something was written there, but it was too dark to make out.

*Do I Dare*

She slowly and stiffly got to her feet and turned on the lights. The room became bright, forcing her to squint and rub the sleep out of her eyes. She felt disoriented and her eyes burned from the earlier tears, but she kneeled down to see under the sink. *Katelyn's handwriting.*

*Do I dare to eat a peach?*

Erica started back, and looked around the small bathroom, though she knew she was alone. Logically, she knew that Katelyn could have been goofing around at anytime, scribbling poetry and notes for the hell of it. The margins of Katelyn's school notebooks were covered with quotes like this. But her gut told her otherwise. She flipped off the light and ran down the hall.

She flung the door to Katelyn's open. The room smelled of her. There were clothes strewn about the floor, a half empty bottle of water on the nightstand.

Erica did not allow herself time to continue taking in her surroundings, and instead began browsing her sister's bookshelf. A tattered copy of *The Waste Land and Other Poems* was among the collection. Erica recognized the line from the bathroom as a line from a poem by TS Eliot. Towards the end, Katelyn was reciting it in her head over and over again, as if she was trying to decipher it's meaning.

She thumbed through the pages until she found "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrouk." Seeing her sister's notes in the margins made Erica's blood run cold. Each annotation felt like being struck in the stomach.

"*Do I dare?*" Eliot asked. Katelyn answered with "*I am.*"

"*Do I dare disturb the universe?*" Katelyn answered with "*I am.*"

"*Do I dare to eat a peach?*" Katelyn answered with "*I am.*"

*Do I Dare*

Erica felt cold. She closed the book and slid it back into the shelf. She noticed it fit next to Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Her sister's favorite book. Erica backed away from the bookshelf until she felt the bed behind her knees and sank down.

She closed her eyes and could hear her sister quoting to her, " 'I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart: I am, I am, I am.' You'll know what it means one day Erica, when you're old enough to start questioning things. Plath was a genius, really before her time. You'll see."

*One day must be today*, Erica realized. She tried to turn off her thoughts. She could not focus in on this idea. She wanted this thought to be hers and hers alone. *Please God just give me this one*. She was thankful her family was out, but knew she had to get control of her thoughts. She had no proof. But there it was, her sister's writing. "*I am. I am. I am.*"

Despite her desire to shut her mind down, Erica was certain of one thing, and there was no trying to make it go away.

*Katelyn is still alive.*