

Fourth Grade Field Trip

“Mom, you hafta sign this.”

Rosie’s mom lifted her eyebrows and reached for the paper Rosie had slapped onto the kitchen counter. “Detention?” she asked, only a hint of a question mark present.

“Field trip.” Rosie announced with a smirk. “We’re going to the death factory.”

Her mom reached for a pen by the phone. “They’re already sending you to the death factory? They’ll be doing this field trip in kindergarten before we know it.” She handed the signed paper back to Rosie. “And don’t call it the death factory.”

The next morning, sixty-eight boisterous fourth graders carried sixty-eight crumpled brown-paper-bag lunches through the doors of two shiny yellow school buses, ecstatic over that most anticipated day in the life of a nine-year-old: Field Trip Day. The chaperoning teachers were not so eager.

A dozen summer camp songs and even more demerits later, the buses bounced past a security guard and through an iron gate. Slowly the noise level descended on each bus as the children crammed close to the windows for their first look at the Clearfield County Regional Finishing Center.

Most of the children had seen photos in their history books of some of the first Finishing Centers ever built—square, cement institutions often made from old, repurposed hospital buildings or schools. But Clearfield County boasted one of the very first modernized centers, designed to look more like a vacation resort than a medical building. It had been built from scratch, its winding, red-brick walkways and lush, green landscaping younger even than the fourth graders. The building itself was cream-colored stone, but the colossal front windows that took up nearly the full face of the towering structure reflected the bright

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blue sky. A fountain as large as a swimming pool sat between two weeping willow trees, its crystal clear water sparkling in the sunlight as it spurted skyward.

Rosie was last off the bus. The breeze blew her unruly hair across her face, and she tripped on a shoelace. As she bent to tie it, a teacher stood over her, tapping an impatient foot. "The whole class is waiting, dear."

"Does the *whole class* want me to fall on my ass?"

"Two demerits. Backtalk and language." She scribbled on her clipboard.

Rosie and the disgruntled teacher caught up with the class as everyone filed through the large glass doors and into a colorful lobby. So many potted plants and flowers surrounded the desk, the teachers had trouble finding the receptionist. The head of a smiling gentleman popped up between two vibrant ferns. "May I help you?" he asked.

"Hopkins Elementary," replied a robust teacher struggling to keep two boys from kicking each other.

"Oh yes. Grade?"

"Four."

"Right. They're all cleared through level three." He bent below the counter and resurfaced with a box. "Here are your passes. Sixty-eight plus four level eights for the adults." He slid the box across the counter. "Your guide will be here momentarily."

Rosie stepped a few feet away from the mass of arms reaching for plastic clip-on level three passes. She glanced at an engraved metallic sign between two elevators.

LEVEL ONE: LOBBY, CHECK-IN, RESTROOMS
LEVEL TWO: ANESTHESIOLOGY, INJECTIONS, CREMATORIUM

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“Rosemary!” came a squawk. Rosie jumped. “Take your pass, and get in line!”

Rosie pursed her lips and scowled at the pass hanging from a badly manicured hand. She yanked it away and clipped it upside-down to her shirt. A crisp-looking tour guide began speaking as Rosie melted into the group. “Stay together, please. Your electronic passes give you clearance through level three only. If you wander outside the boundaries, an alarm will sound.”

Rosie crammed her hands into her pockets and moved with the herd toward the elevators as the guide cheerily babbled on about the history of the center. After three trips, the elevators managed to deposit the entire group onto the next floor.

Rosie squinted in the brightness of the wide hallway. She followed the group as the corridor opened into a massive indoor courtyard surrounded on three sides by multi-colored doors with tiny square windows. The students huddled in front of the guide in the center of the courtyard between two fountains and several bushes and small trees. People scurried around them, mostly staff members buzzing between appointments, but also the occasional finisher walking off a hangover from his last night of partying. Rosie noticed a young intern pausing briefly to wish a finisher Happy Deathday. The man smiled. “There’s a reason they tell ya to have your deathday parties a week before your last day,” he said rubbing his temples.

The tour guide was pointing at the doors to the right as she said, “...injections with anesthetics. And to this side...” She dramatically shifted her arms to the left. “...injections straight up.” She pointed her thumbs to the wall behind her. “Behind me are the furnace rooms where every person is cremated when they’ve finished... well... finishing!” She chuckled and walked around the group toward the corridor.

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As the rest of her class clustered in front of the elevators, Rosie turned to read the third line of the sign on the wall behind them.

LEVEL THREE: GAS CHAMBERS, COLD ROOMS

After another stifling elevator ride, Rosie stepped onto the third level. The hallway was as bright and wide as the previous one and turned into an equally artificial courtyard. However, instead of dozens of doors along the walls, there were only two doors on each of the three sides. Beside each door was a large window covered by a curtain on the inside. The guide was again dramatically pointing to different doors, saying something about four different kinds of gas and two cold rooms. "Finishers can choose a slow freeze of up to thirty-six hours or a fast freeze which takes less than a minute!" she said enthusiastically. "Unfortunately, we don't have any appointments for public viewing today, but hopefully you'll all have a chance to catch one of these fascinating finishes one day soon!"

As they flocked to the elevators once more, Rosie caught sight of the last metallic sign she would see for the day. The last two lines read:

LEVEL FOUR: CARDIAC ARREST, ANEURISM, STROKE, ASPHYXIATION.
LEVEL FIVE: POISONS AND CHEMICALS, GALLOWS, SHOOTING RANGE

When the elevators had emptied the group into the first floor lobby, the guide finished her tour. "At age twelve, you'll all have clearance through level five. There are nine levels in all, and they each include many interesting choices. Any questions?"

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Two hours later, Rosie hopped off the bus behind the rest of her class and spotted her mom's car across the school parking lot. As she climbed in the front seat, her mom squeezed her hand and backed out of the parking space. "How was your field trip, honey?"

"Pretty boring," Rosie said coolly. "But when we go in seventh grade, I can see the gallows!"

Rosie's mom smiled. "Yep. The gallows are neat."