

Bloom

By Zahia Islam, grade 7

I kick a large piece of wood out of the way, flooding the hut with light. I turn around. Small stacks of wood create what are supposed to be chairs and tables - although they're rarely used. Messy blankets and pillows fill up the far right corner, dirty with dust. I picked up my fanny pack and wide-brimmed straw hat.

"Have you ever thought of stealing something good, like a large, chocolate cake?" I glance over to the once-dark figure sitting against the wall, now revealed by daylight. Her knees are tucked up against her chest, and she clutches some sort of object, most likely a piece of wood, in her hand. Rich brown curls fall on her face, covering it, but I can still make out the emerald eyes staring at me. Similar to mine. We even have similar ages, only one year apart. But unlike me, she's gentler, kinder.

"God, and *how* am I supposed to steal that?" I say. "You think that I can just whisk it away without getting it utterly smushed, while everyone believes it just- *poof* - vanished into thin air?"

"Yup, exactly," she says dreamily. I sigh in disappointment, but my chapped lips curve into a smile.

"See you," I respond, as I head out. I hear her calling out "bye" behind me.

I quicken my pace as I run past the adobe walls surrounding our hut, and slide past the exit of the alleyway, almost completely covered with crates. The walls open up, revealing a much wider pathway, lined by stone and adobe houses. Palm trees and desert plants decorate

their front yards, dotting the dry atmosphere with life. They're made complete with stone pathways. The richer side of the town. I wonder if we'll ever have something like this. A real home.

Sunlight illuminates the kitchen, streaming out of the large, open window behind the sink. Her tall figure stands over a cutting board and cucumbers. She wears a sage cardigan with little daisies, along with beige flared leggings. Must be back from summer school.

She turns towards me, eyes glowing with light that may as well have been harvested from the sun itself. "Oh my god, Mr. Cline loves my designs," she gushes. "I'll have some of the highest marks!"

"Wow, who would've thought!" I say sarcastically, although with a smile. I start grabbing plates. What would I be? I've never given it much thought, but I have time, being only 12 years old. And with our family fortune, I may as well be anything I want.

Well, turns out I'd become a thief 2 years later. *Isn't that a nice profession!* But home is no longer what it used to be.

Now, I would do anything to never go back.

In a different life, I would've gasped at the thought of stealing something. But now the guilt has blurred away, lost to the fog of morality. Now, the act is as simple as little white lies. And I've certainly made those before - although I can't say they were "white".

And today, I can feel the energy flowing through me as I run on the balls of my feet. Excitement. I know exactly what I want.

The crowds get larger, merchants and vendors becoming more apparent, wheeling their stalls. The sand is flat and compressed, beat down by a maze of footprints from the tanned people of Cemress. I weave past people, watching the town slowly come to life. I

catch a whiff of something sweet and enticing, trying to lure me in. But nothing can stop me from my mission.

As if the world is listening to my thoughts, I spot it. Two large stalls are attached, and although I've seen greater signs of wealth before, I've never seen something quite like this in these streets. Wooden bowls spilling with colorful scarves accompany trays of cheap yet elegant jewelry, taking up most of the cart. Towards the left, simple sandals and all sorts of bags lie straight on the wood. Other bowls fill the rest of the cart, although I can't see what they contain.

And, slightly to the left, right in front of where the vendor stands, is a stack of straw hats, with large rims sinking downwards. Just what I need. But the problem couldn't be more apparent. With the stack sitting right in the vendor's view, I can't exactly slip off with one. They're too large for me to take unnoticed, anyway. I internally groan.

But I know that I've found my target. Where else would I find something this perfect? And, delicately placed on the side of the very first hat, lies a youthful, five-petalled flower, coloured with the soft pink hues of clouds drifting during sunrise. Full of life. Exactly what she would want.

I stare out the window watching an endless landscape of dunes pass. The land seems robbed of color, besides the sandy yellow I've seen far too much of. I have a feeling that few people will be getting off at our stop. But where else are we supposed to go?

Beside me, Leisha slumps back onto the seat, after craning her neck to view the window.

"Only 2 days since, and I already miss seeing actual nature," she declares. "Like, what happened to genuine colours out here?"

I respond with one measly word, not bothering to make conversation. "Yeah."

Silence creeps by. I think about Cemress. How better could it truly be from home, a land of outcasts and runaways? How could we live, changing from rich to poor in a matter of hours? Yet I've always dreamt about having my own life. The one I thought I would have when things were fine. No longer captured by his thin yet ever restraining strings, controlling my every move. Where I was the marionette.

We'd have freedom, but at what cost?

I escaped for a reason. And in my mind, still living under his control would mean giving myself up to him, still being his toy long after my disappearance. And I can't let that happen.

I scan the area, formulating a plan. The stalls are against a stone wall, creating a small corner where few people are. The center is generally clear, besides the line of purchasers. But besides that, the vendor is clearly getting as much attention as he came for. Another problem to add to the list.

Yet I walk over to the display, and start looking at some sandals, bringing them closer to me. I pretend to observe items, although I only have eyes for one. *Step 1.* I make my way to the hats, pulling the stack a little to the side as if I simply don't want to interfere with the purchasers. I watch the man as I pull it slightly farther again. He doesn't seem to care, busy growing his wealth. I drag it close to the edge, like I did to everything I touched. But this time, I continue until a small flap of beige hangs off, vulnerable to the small shove of an arm. I just hope that I'm the one to deliver the blow.

Step 2. I continue browsing, now looking at the scarves and jewelry that rest on the far right edge. Or in other words, as far away from the sun hats as one could get. I focus on

the necklace and bracelet trays. Unlike most, one simply has two black beads and a silver star charm that hangs from golden thread. I pick the soon-to-be-ripped beauty up and walk closer to the wall, facing the stone. I bring the thread close to my chest, using my body as a blockade from wandering eyes. I start winding my fingers through the thread until I have a decent hold on both sides. 3, 2, 1- I yank hard on both ends. The thread breaks. My arms jolt outwards, and I feel the sensation of tripping. I shove the broken pieces into a closed fist as I turn back to the tray. My face reveals nothing. Instead, I release the pieces back into the tray, picking up another necklace. Then, as if I just noticed it, I open my lips slightly and purse my eyebrows together.

“Sir!” I say, turning to face the gruff vendor. “I believe one of your necklaces may have broken!” I hold up a glistening black bead. That gets his attention. He walks towards the tray, nodding his thanks to me. I smile brightly. *Just a young, innocent girl, full of kindness and naivety.* I step aside.

Step 3. My heartbeat quickens as I walk along the edge stalls, swinging my arms. I approach the hats, but pay them no notice. I act oblivious when my arm hits the stack, sending them flying to the ground. Spotting the pink flower, I kicked it underneath my skirt, praying that no one noticed.

I hang my mouth open, staring. I contort my face into an expression of panic as I quickly bend down and start picking up hats frantically. I notice the vendor staring at me.

“I’m so, so sorry sir!” I say, fake worry apparent in my voice. “I’ll fix it right away, I promise!” I shake the dust off of a hat. *You wouldn’t mind if I just accidentally dragged a hat along with me, would you?*

He grunts, shaking his head. "You better hurry girl, my customers don't have all day. You're lucky I ain't making you pay for it." My innocent facade protects me from what could've happened otherwise.

Like it did back then. Well until it didn't.

I nod with understanding. Once I'm done, I place the stack back onto the table.

My heart continues to speed up as I attempt to walk away, a sensation I know all too well. I wonder who I'd be without it. Probably a better person.

I walk past a couple of people, my eyes concentrated on where my skirt touches the ground. I continue shuffling, dragging the hat along with my foot. I know that Leisha won't mind the dust; we've practically been living in it for the last two months. I glance up. I desperately want to snatch up the hat and break into a run, but I must wait until I reach the thin alley that lies not too far from where I am now. *Almost there* - I see a flash run past me, and my heart runs wild. The next thing I know, I'm sprawled on the ground, my arms and legs a scraped mess around me. I quickly come to my senses and wave off the boy's apologies, my eyes looking for one thing only.

Where is it??? My mind screams as I turn my head to the side, my eyes searching wildly.

There. Lying on the sand, dust staining it, just a step away from me. The sun casts a spotlight upon it. I look up, about to snatch it, when my heart drops.

I see the vendor staring at me, shock, anger, and confusion displayed on his face.

Without a second thought, I snatch it up and run.

"Hey! You! Come back here!" I hear the vendor shout in a gravelly voice behind me. I push past onlookers, my only thought being *to run*. *Run, run, run*. I land hard on my bent

leg and push off of it, feeling the power rush through me as I land on the other one and do it again. But power isn't the only thing I feel. Fear.

My mind is nothing but a toddler's scribbles, making incomprehensible thoughts. High levels of adrenaline run through me, terrifying yet electrifying. I can hear the vendor shouting behind me, trying to catch up. But I know he can't. I look back and see a train of people watching and an abandoned stand - *and patrols. RUN.* I clutch the hat tightly and swiftly turn into a random alleyway.

I bolt towards a pile of crates blocking a narrower alley between two sandstone houses. My skin flakes off as I claw on the wood, pushing myself onto the next one, and then the next one. I clutch both hats and jump off, landing hard on my legs and arms. I spring up and continue running. Up ahead, I see a much busier street, one that I can blend into and disappear in. With my hat, they haven't seen my full face yet, so if I can just reach home and change into something new, I'll be fine. I just have to keep going.

Clouds of sand puff out from my toes with every step, causing me to cough. I still hear patrols yelling behind me, but I don't stop. I can't. I launch myself out of the alleyway and into perhaps the busiest part of the town, entirely filled with people. I dive into the crowd and slow my pace. I change my outfit in whatever way possible. I flip my hat inside out, tie my hair into a bun, and clip my skirt up. I slide near a vendor, and when they aren't looking, I pick out an elastic band. Then going to the next, I slide out, a small, tightly wrapped scarf. I step back into the crowd, tying the front of my tank top with the band and folding it inwards. I unravel the scarf and put it over my shoulders.

I continue walking, keeping my head down and eyes covered by the brim. I try to find out where I am, and how I got here, now that my mind has cooled down. *Think, Adrienne.*

I spot a bench near the edge of the square and walk towards it. My breath burdens me, and I'm grateful when I finally reach it. The adrenaline has left my body, leaving me shaking and sweaty and dizzy and so very tired. I examine the injuries of my fingers, catching my breath. It feels as though I'll never get it back.

I look up and scan my surroundings. I don't visit here often, as it's far from home. But my location starts coming back to me. *One of the two alleys* - My thoughts stop when I see patrols, pointing towards me. Cursing, I set off again, swerving into the nearest alley.

Now I'm much slower, and weaker, yet I keep running. I run into a new alleyway, a much thinner one. There are a few, small doorways leading to an apartment building. The other wall is nothing but stone. I see a few people walking here, perhaps one or two. I can't see the end of it, besides something small and brown in the distance.

I focus all my energy on running, looking down at my feet. *One step. Another.* But when I look up again, my heart drops.

Four, large barrels cover the rest of the wall.

It's quieter here, and I'm not sure if I'm imagining the patrol's footsteps lurking forward to me. All I know is that I'm too tired to climb up the barrels.

I've gotten caught. Really, truly caught.

I don't want to give myself up to them, having no clue what the future could end up as if caught. But as I approach the barrels, I know that any attempt would be useless. Now I'm sure I hear the faint noise of their boots. *They'll spot me any second now.*

I'm in bed, snuggled against the softest pillows. I stare at the glow of my phone screen, at the words. They tell the story of a girl looking for her missing love. I have an idea of what I want to be when I grow up now. Perhaps a singer, or a writer.

But things aren't the same anymore. Not since he changed, muttering all day about things he won't tell us. Something about the real estate business his brothers own. Something about failing. Something about a girl named Lily. That's all we could gather.

But that doesn't stop me from, "reading those stupid fiction books," or, "wasting valuable time on silly pointless dreams." All that means is that I have to be smarter, sneakier. And secrets are a small price to pay.

I lose myself in the carefully crafted words that slowly unravel the huge mystery.

Suddenly, my blanket is no longer covering me. A hand grabs at my phone and snatches it away.

"Hey!" I yell- until I realize who it is. A tall, looming figure stands by my bedside, his face illuminated by the glow of the phone, like when telling ghost stories. I falter, as I feel something sinking in my stomach. He flips randomly at the pages, his face slowly contorting into an image of rage- and throws the phone onto the floor. I hear something shatter as I swallow protests.

Now, he stares at me.

I start shrinking back. "Sorry, just reading, I know it's stupid, I won't ever waste sleep like that again-"

"Did I not make it clear to you?" he says, his voice a low yet menacing rumble. And he did, he really did make it clear to me. I can tell that he's trying to calm down. And although I'm good at reading his emotions, I'm not too sure if calming down worked. He continues. "Did I not make it clear to you that you are setting yourself up for a future of failure? This," he pauses, gesturing at my broken phone as his voice raises, "is how you get

all sorts of nonsense into your mind, just like what happened with your sister. This is how you become the insolent little being you are today!”

A small, “Sorry,” escapes out of my lips, but not loud enough for him to hear. I know how to read emotions, not decrease them. Now, there are no lies for me to hide behind, no imaginary situations, no twisted truths. The only exit is the door, blocked by his large figure. I’m helplessly trapped between 4 walls, like a defenseless little bug in a vicious venus fly trap.

I’ve been caught. Really, truly, caught.

I feel the walls pressing against me. My heartbeat quickens. My breath comes out as quick gasps. My head hurts as I frantically turn it in every direction, trying to find a way to escape. But I know there is none. Everything seems incoherent, besides footsteps growing louder and louder-

A firm hand grasps my forearm and pushes me into darkness. The sudden movement brings me back to reality, as I stumble into the nearest wall. I spin around and swing my arm out, feeling nothing. No attackers.

I see a small outline of light around a rectangle, showing where the door is. I’m about to open it, when I hear voices outside and stop.

“Have you seen anyone running down this path lately?” someone says. I freeze.

A youthful voice responds. “Yes, climbing right over those barrels. Is there something wrong?” He ends with a hint of concern.

“Don’t worry, we’ve just found another little thief. We’ll get them soon enough,” she says, her voice assuring. “Thank you for your help.” I stay still, trying to hear her footsteps fade.

Soon, I open the door, momentarily blinded as I step into the light. I'm tense waiting to see what my attacker - or savior - wants from me. But he's looking to where the patrol left, the back of his clean shirt facing me. His hair is clean too, compared to my unkempt waves.

One of the richer ones.

I start walking, trying to slip away, but he turns towards me. I falter at his gaze, unsure if I should continue. His amber eyes have some sort of warmth to him, but not in the sunny way my sister has it. Like a glowing campfire on a chilly autumn night.

"Hey," he says, and I can't tell whether he is being friendly or demanding.

"Uh, hi! I'm just gonna-"

He cuts me off. "Be safe," he says, the corner of his mouth slightly raised as if he knows what I did.

"Oh, uh, ok," I stammer, half wanting to slap myself. I whisper the ghost of "bye", but it's too quiet to be heard. When I feel far away enough, I break out into a run, still hugging the large straw hat with the little flower.

A pile of wood comes into view. The hut. Home. I see Leisha hanging by the doorway, still carving a little piece of wood.

"Hey!" I call once I'm a bit closer. She jumps up and runs the rest of the distance.

"Huh, nice scarf. Did you get a big chocolate cake? Please say you did," she starts, although she knows that couldn't be possible. But it's fine; I have something better.

I reveal the hat from behind my back. "For you," I say. Her face immediately brightens as she grabs it. But unexpectedly, she tosses something back. I catch it in my fist. Something wooden.

“For you,” she replies with a smile. I open my hand and allow sunlight to reveal a meticulously crafted miniature flower, with every little detail done right in my eyes. And deep inside me, I feel something bloom.