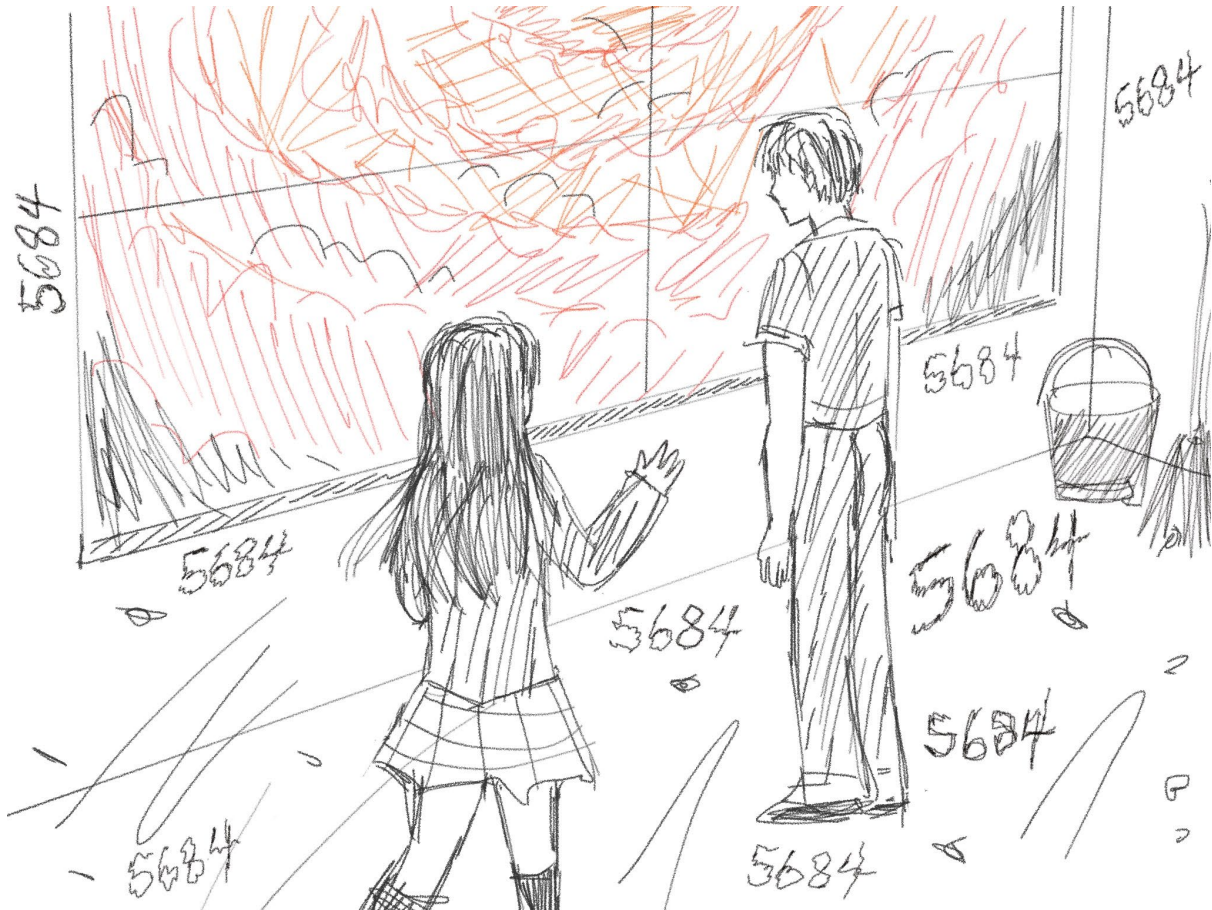


5684



All along the crippled hallway that seeps into darkness, all the lockers are etched menacingly with 5684.

The world had felt strange that morning. I missed the bus and suffered the consequence, having hastily run down the street. Amidst the blur I passed a heap of trees. It is still the middle of Autumn, yet they had no leaves at all. They were black, skeletal and jutted out like claws reaching to the sky. As I ran, I felt the pavement curve downward, hearing my shoes thump on asphalt. My spine caved in, pressed against my bag that packed more heft than usual. The overall sensation felt like standing on a steep hill. Looking down, about to fall on the edge. Somehow, I managed to stay on two feet.

Now I'm alone in the school hallway. Enclosed by walls, covered in soot and ash. Chunks of ceiling had collapsed onto the floor, spewing shards of cement all over the tiles. 5684 burnt into my vision everywhere I turn in rapidfire. I'm crestfallen, looking around desperately trying to find someone—anyone in this wasteland. Instead, a gush of wind greets me. Jolting me awake to prove that I'm not inside a precarious nightmare.

I let the handles of my backpack slip off my shoulders and rummage through, pulling out my cellphone. To my surprise, a text was sent five minutes ago.

'Meet under the banister' - Mike.

Relief washes over me. It was from Mike. My only friend—2 years older—and happens to be a school janitor. As I scale across the ruins, all I can think of is a memory, a question he asked me 3 weeks ago.

It was after school, under the banister of the winding staircase at the bottom floor. I hadn't spoken to anyone for 3 months by then; due to the vow of silence I had taken. I began to wonder whether it had any impression on anyone at all. No one but an eye, except Mike.

I was crouched, zipping my hoodie all the way up, the wind, incessantly creeping into my sleeves.

I watched Mike clean the floor. From the window, dull light cascaded onto him. I had watched him do it so many times by then I was aware of his technique—scrubbing it sideways, then straight, removing dirt from the crevices. I paid close attention to his demeanor. Calm, but focused, eyebrows creasing in the center, lips pursed tight. *Janitors actually... do a lot*, I thought. I wanted to ask Mike why he did it for a living—the pay was barely anything and people scoff if you tell them you're a janitor—so why?

He turned around and smiled at me awkwardly, “why do you insist on being silent?” he asked, though he knew I wouldn't respond.

I shrugged, causing him to sigh and put down his mop. The sun was setting then, painting him in brilliant orange as he turned to look out the window. Whenever he did that, it looked as if he were pondering some big question.

“What if ...it was the end of the world” he pauses, turning to me “and you could scream anything.... anything you wanted from the top of your lungs, because it wouldn't matter anymore, what would you say?”

I didn't answer at the time, but I thought about it now, bursting open the door to the bottom floor. I'm so eager to see a familiar face. If I were to answer that question now however, I'd say, 'it wouldn't matter if I stay silent either, since there'd be no one to hear.'

I make it to the banister, my heart catching in my throat. I see him, standing just as he always is, facing the window. A smile grows on my face as I inch closer, my hand just about to reach him. I want to say, *you don't know how glad I am to see you here.*

I break into a cold sweat; my hand runs right through him. His body is iridescent, a hologram. My eyes widen, barely making out the details on his uniform nor texture on his skin. I shake my head, *I... don't understand.*

'Mike' doesn't acknowledge me, I follow his gaze beyond the window, muffling a scream. The view outside is unlike anything I have ever seen. The sky shrouded in

vibrant red, puffs of grey smoke stretching into the horizon. I hold my breath as the sulfur starts to kick in. The streets are set ablaze, all the buildings that once stood had been destroyed, lost in dancing fires. There is not a soul to be seen, no bodies, no animals. Nothing. It's as if everyone had abandoned this place long ago.

I look back to Mike, knowing his real self-had gone. Replaced by a robot clone, an imposter. Its soulless eyes blink red like a traffic light. A glint crosses their surface, typing out words as a computer would. I peer closer, unknowingly breaking my vow of silence. I read the text aloud,

"Welcome, to the year 5684."