

Grade 7 Winner

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The New World

Let me lay it out for you.

The Mayans weren't entirely right. The world is still round, that much hasn't changed. But the land, what's left, is different. There are no continents. Only Islands scattered across the world like confetti strewn by a giant hand. They aren't far apart; close enough so that if you stood at the edge you might glimpse the next one against the dark sky. It is always dark.

I can't see water. It's not completely gone. Two known patches lay north of my Island, far apart. Or at least, that is what I hear. Travel from your Island is banned. That rule was made long ago, back when it first happened.

What separates the Islands is now called the Other Zone. It's an unknown substance; science is also banned now, so we haven't yet figured it out. It's part dust, part mist, and part land, or at least, that's how it appears. It's very strange. Looking at it too long burns your eyes, and inhaling it causes a chest thumping cough. If you touch it too long, you'll die. No one's figured that part out yet. No one's figured out anything.

We can't talk about it. I guess that's all part of their clever plan. We're trapped like ants in a science project. Only people are not projects. Projects come and go and then they're done. We're not going anywhere. We're not free. They tell us it's fine, that this is the future, and the present has become the past. They must be brainwashed. Or crazy. Who wouldn't be crazy after what happened, with The Fire and the sky collapsing? They've taken over, I don't care what the others say.

They've taken over. And this is how it happened.

I was a kid. I remember it was an unusually calm day. Isn't that how it always is before something bad happens? You never expect it. I was trudging home from school with a friend, Timmy or Tommy, or something like that. It was a long time ago. He was going on about something, but I barely heard him. Instead, I was watching a group of kids huddled on the lawn of a house.

"What is that?" I asked. Something had caught my eye. We pushed through the

dozen young kids. There was a red patch on the grass, and it appeared to be glowing.

"What *is* that?" I asked again, and bent down low to examine it. I took a deep breath and fumes caught in my throat. I spluttered.

There was something bizarre about it. It was not quite solid, and the fumes were red and translucent. When I went to touch it, it singed the skin around my finger before I could get close.

A car roared behind us, and I turned to see my mother pull up. She shouted "Lionel! Something is going on. We need to get to the Safe Zone!"

I jumped into the passenger seat, concerned with the panic on my mother's face. She leaned across me to offer my friend a ride. But he declined.

And that's the last time I saw Tommy. Or Timmy. Or any of my other friends.

We had been driving for ten minutes when my mother slammed on the brakes and turned on the radio. A man was speaking loud and clear, a tone of urgency strumming the calm voice he was forced to display for citizens.

"I repeat: This is an Emergency Broadcast. Police Officers are patrolling the area in which this substance named The Fire has appeared and will direct you to the Safe Zone. If you come across The Fire, do not approach. Scientists on the job have reported it is 'Highly Hazardous'."

My mother snapped the radio off. "Here is the Safe Zone?" she shouted at the dashboard. She drove on, leaning her foot further on the pedal until we had surely left the speed limit miles behind us. Suddenly she swung the steering wheel and then we were driving off the road and into long grass. I started screaming. So did my mother.

It swarmed around us. It was bright red, smoking slightly, easy to understand why they'd call it The Fire. It was clouding our windshield, yet it clinked on the metal hood like pebbles when driving down a gravel road. It came out of nowhere, like a gust of rotten wind on a dry day. The car was spinning around frantically as my mother twisted and turned the wheel, trying desperately to get out of The Fire.

Suddenly, mercifully, a building loomed through the mist, surrounded by emergency vehicles. An abandoned warehouse that had gained new life as the Safe Zone.

My mother pointed the car in its direction and again pressed the gas. The wheels spun in the mud because the treads were burning off. There was no choice but to make a run for the Safe Zone. I shouted to my mother to hold her breath just before I held mine. We opened our doors.

The mist didn't kill. But it burned and ate at my skin so badly I shrieked with pain. My leg was ripped open and I was screaming again. I dared to look down at the hole in my leg, but there was no blood. Just smoke. Still we ran, screaming and scared, when suddenly we were out of The Fire. We stood a moment to catch some clean air, but it was resuming its crawl, slinking its way toward us, slimy at first and then hardening immediately. I grabbed my mother's hand to pull her toward the building before it could reach us. She was staring back like it was the end of the world.

We reached the door only to find it locked. I banged on it until a man with a chalk white face opened it. I dashed in, pulling my petrified mother along. The man bolted the door behind us. I thought that was strange. Surely others would be arriving any minute, and throughout the night. But I was wrong.

When I had caught my breath, I took a look around. Maybe two hundred people were huddled about the room. In the middle, make-shift cots had been scattered in a haste. The windows were fogged with red smoke.

"What *is* it?" asked a small girl. She was short with freckles that completely covered her face. Her red hair was pulled back. She clung to a raggedy doll.

"They're calling it The Fire," I said, feeling somehow this would help make sense of it.

My skin was raw and the hole in my leg was aching. My mother was demanding to know who was in charge, her son needed medical attention.

A sudden sickening screech made everyone cower. A horrible silence followed. And then everything exploded.

The sky collapsed on us. I saw it fall, like the roof of a house caving in. The world was twirling in endless circles, until I was sick. I heard my mother calling out to me. You always know your mother's voice.

When it stopped, the world we knew was gone. The Fire had made sure of that. It had receded after the sky fell, but it never left. The Safe Zone, if it had ever been that, was now an Island. I stood on the dirt that was left beneath my feet, and an eerie shadow

crossed over everything. I looked up. It was too dark beyond twenty meters to see anything. Then something caught my eye. Out beyond what I started calling the Other Zone were other islands, which I figure had been other Safe Zones.

I was only eleven when everything changed. They told me it was for the better, and I would have believed them if it wasn't for my mother. She simply disappeared, they told me, but to this day, twenty years later, I can't forget the night it happened. The night her voice called for me. The night they took her.

I lie on the ground, looking out beyond the Other Zone. I would say society is coming along just fine if I didn't know any better, if I hadn't been raised to eleven in the Old World. I swore to Angie I'd never have kids because of it. She still has the raggedy doll; she says it was from her great grandmother, she says she has to pass it on. I still refuse. There is no way I am bringing someone up here.

But she hasn't lost all hope, because I tell her every day I'm going to find a way out. And once I do, she'll have a little girl to pass that doll on to, and I'll have The Old World back, and anyone who wants to come can come, because surely there is not a single soul who likes being trapped here. I know about *them*. And I'm going to do something about it. You wait, you'll see.