

TAKE THE LEAD STORIES

LEADERS UNLOCKED

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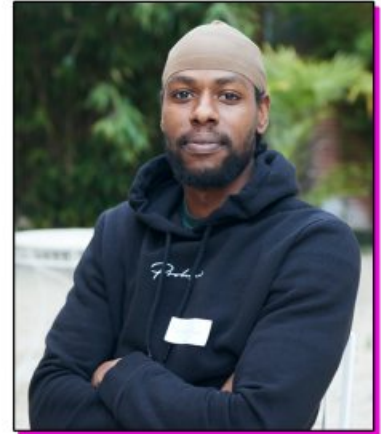
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FOREWORD

As a young kid growing up, I was always fascinated by fantasy stories, Manga in particular. Something about these stories allowed me to dream and imagine and create ideas of my own. These stories took me on a visual journey and influenced my emotions as well as my outlook on life. I identified real life stories within these fantasies as well as life lessons when it came to friendships, relationships and integrity to name a few points.



I always used to create ideas and concepts for stories that could be applied to different formats of media such as books, films and tv shows etc but because of my upbringing and the environment that I had grown up in, I was always of the mindset that I wouldn't ever find the opportunity to express these thoughts, feelings and ideas. From my experience and perspective, young black boys and girls from my environment were and are hardly given trust and opportunities to better their lives as well as the opportunity and platform to express ourselves in the ways that we choose and in a way that made us feel free and not pressured to conform to normal convention.

As I got older and started to engage with organisations, systems of review as well as working with young people more, I began to notice that the ways that organisations tend to extract information or research and feedback was the same; it was very lineal and one dimensional and didn't allow for or cater to the fact that young people learn and express themselves in a multitude of ways that is hardly ever facilitated. They did not allow for 'creative expression' where there are multiple mediums of expression and reflection provided.

Because of this I feel that information taken from young people is limited to the point where their expression, voice and reasoning are often misunderstood or aren't cultivated correctly; I feel that young people are subject to one way of doing things which is of no benefit them.

When I was given the opportunity to form my own project it was an easy decision to create Take the Lead Stories as a medium and platform for the creative expression of young people, which gives an extra dimension to the Leaders Unlocked organisation. This collection of stories captures the expressions of our young writers and shows that we can all relate to each other on some level; it shows that your dreams are not just simply pipe dreams, your dreams are reality waiting for you to manifest them.

I would like to give a big thanks to Rose, Suzanne, Daniel & Mark for their support throughout this project.

Finally, these stories could not have been created without the hard work, time and dedication of our young writers who have blessed us with beautiful and inspiring stories.

Dreams become reality.

- Romaine Murchison, January 2022



IF ONLY HE COULD TELL THE TRUTH

BY
ADAM

LEADERS
UNLOCKED

IF ONLY HE COULD TELL THE TRUTH

This is about a boy who had an idyllic childhood. He enjoyed going to school, he was popular, kind and all the teachers loved him. His favourite days were cycling into the countryside to photograph buzzards, kingfishers and herds of red deer. With the sun shining and the smell of the rapeseed fields filling the air. We will call him **Ayden.**

Everything started to change at the age of thirteen, he had started upper school, it was a massive school situated in a large town. Straight away he felt the pressure and it wasn't good. He felt overwhelmed with all the changes in his life.

Ayden's older brothers were well known and popular with the wrong types. Everyone assumed Ayden was the same as his brothers.

Ayden wanted to go to school and was a people pleaser. He worked hard in lessons and continued to be friendly with everyone out of school. He didn't like confrontation and just found it much easier to be friendly and agreeable with everyone. He started to hang out in a nearby nature reserve but soon realised his peers were not there for the wildlife.

Then Ayden's dad got diagnosed with cancer which meant his mum was very busy looking after him and this made his life even more difficult.

Ayden was **struggling to keep up at school.** He had previously had thirteen different English teachers in one school year alone and undiagnosed Dyslexia. The classes were huge and he was too embarrassed to ask for help.

Soon the older boys were giving him **"FREE" weed;** Ayden loved it. He felt it helped him escape the worries about his dad and school. He was soon being taught that it was normal to lie, especially to your parents. He thought kids went to school and came home and lied to their parents... he genuinely believed it was normal like an unwritten rule, sort of "Kids' Common Law". If only he knew then it was just because he was hanging around with the wrong people.

Ayden was told he could only keep getting 'free weed' if he could help them out by selling weed to his friends. Ayden knew this wasn't good but didn't know what else to do. He tried to get a job but it's really difficult when you're under sixteen.

The **stress of selling and lying to his parents started to affect his schoolwork.** The teachers suspected he was using weed. They started calling his mum which made him feel even more guilty and he would use more weed.

Ayden got caught with weed in his pocket at school. He was arrested by the police and suspended from school. He was so ashamed and desperate to turn everything around. He confided in a teacher about the struggles and pressure from older students and was assured he would get help but it just made everything worse.

When Ayden returned to school he was searched every day by staff, he was made to feel like a failure and was isolated from his good friends. **He started to hate school.**

Within six months he was permanently excluded and sent to a **PRU (Pupil Referral Unit).**

The PRU was based in a different town and he was taken daily by taxi. The staff were much kinder but it was almost impossible to get a proper education. **The disruption that goes on in a PRU is at another level...** he would often help staff calm down students, particularly the younger ones. Ayden's mum was always communicating with the PRU asking them to give him extra lessons so he could follow his dream to be a paramedic and take his exams. Ayden thought his English teacher was amazing, probably the best bloody English Teacher in the country. She went above and beyond to try to help him. She would get him to write stories like this one and that was probably the start of him telling the truth.

Ayden had been working well with his youth worker, Shaun. Ayden could tell he really wanted to help him but didn't believe he could actually do anything that would really help.

Ayden was leading a double life desperately trying to keep everyone happy. Assuring his family they had nothing to worry about whilst he was really having to work non-stop selling weed and getting **deeper and deeper into the life he was trying to escape.**

Ayden had started to slowly tell Shaun the truth. Just a few details, nothing much but it felt good to tell the truth. Shaun seemed to understand how difficult his life was. He said it sounded like he was *'riding waves and every time he got washed up on the beach he was dragged back again'*. This really stuck in Ayden's mind and gave him the strength to keep trying.

After turning sixteen, Ayden left the PRU and couldn't **believe he managed to get an interview for an apprenticeship in Social Care.** He was nervous at the interview but he decided to tell them THE TRUTH about being expelled and going to a PRU. He told them how he enjoyed helping the younger children and to his amazement he got the job. He started his apprenticeship in September. This was a turning point: he loved his job; he was finally earning his own money and was determined to have a fresh start with **NO MORE LYING.**

Going to the PRU had isolated him but he felt good about his new job and his family and Shaun were so proud of him. **Ayden felt he had missed out on a chunk of his childhood life.** He never had the end of term parties, the prom, Halloween, Bonfire Night, Christmas, birthday parties (not the normal kind anyway). He wanted his life back and he told them he wasn't going to sell weed for them anymore.

Life finally felt good, everyone was proud of him again, he was 16 years old and he could look forward to Halloween and Guy Fawkes night. He had made it onto the beach and the sun was shining!

A week later Ayden was contacted by an adult (gang leader) and told he had a new job and had to deliver a package once a week and **he wasn't being asked he was being told** - Ayden had no choice but to do as he was told.

Later in the year a flat was raided by the police and the package Ayden had handled was recovered. Ayden was arrested and charged with concern to supply class 'A' drugs. Ayden felt like life had gone all the way back to when he was at school but a **100 times worse!!**

Actually it was a 1000 times worse because then he then got told by the gang he had to pay back **£12k** for the lost package. He was dragged back into the deep, dark cold sea and was drowning!

Ayden was forced to sell drugs to pay back his debt. **IF ONLY HE COULD TELL THE TRUTH.** He was working full time, studying and selling for god knows how many hours a day - his life was truly getting out of control **WITH LIES** but he couldn't bear to disappoint his family.

Ayden took out a loan, borrowed and used his wages to try to pay back the money, all without anyone knowing **THE TRUTH.** Every time he got close to paying it off something would go wrong - he was stabbed and robbed on numerous occasions.

THE PRESENT

We are now in a COVID Pandemic. Ayden's work has been incredibly stressful working in full PPE. His family are getting suspicious and putting him under more pressure TO TELL THE TRUTH.

The debt keeps getting bigger, he and his family are being threatened... Recently Ayden finally cracked under the pressure and told his family, Shaun and his work THE TRUTH.

Shaun was relieved when Ayden finally told him **EVERYTHING.** There were lots of emotions. Shaun said it joined all the dots up for him. Ayden said he really was a big old support.

Ayden receives a lot of support from his work colleagues, Shaun and family but the realisation of what he had gone through is affecting his health and he is finding it almost impossible to sleep. He feels so guilty for lying and he has come close to breaking point.

Five years on, Ayden is eighteen years old and his name was cleared at trial but the story is far from over and the fight continues.

Ayden believes he paid back well over £20k and still receives threats for more money.

Ayden passed his apprenticeship with a MERIT.

Ayden still wants to continue helping others.

What would Ayden say to his thirteen-year-old self?

“TELL THE TRUTH”

This story has been written to encourage and support anyone who is struggling.

(It's people like me I want to read it)

It's about an ordinary boy without an ordinary story

It has a good beginning and we are still hoping for a good ending

But what about the Middle?

When threatening people turn up at your door there isn't a codebook.

It's not like a film, you haven't got a clue what to do

In the end he was forced to TELL THE TRUTH

We sat as a family and talked

Things came close, but in the end,

We survived,

We wasn't kidnapped, we didn't lose the car and the house didn't get burnt down.

*Telling **THE TRUTH**, it just helped one hell of a lot.*



A JOURNEY TILL

TODAY

BY
ZARA KHAN

LEADERS
UNLOCKED

A JOURNEY TILL TODAY

Kids Playing Outside

It was a bright sunny day in the heart of the city. Every morning, on seeing the glimmer of sunshine coming through the curtains I would jump out of bed, and go outside to play by myself and maybe sometimes with the local kids if they were out that early. **My name is Laila.**

As it was the summer break, local kids would be always be playing outside, there was also a new play area being built and the kids would knock on and ask for me. 'Can Laila play out?', they would ask. All the kids loved to play on the tractors and equipment.

I loved to be outside, it was better than being at home. My mum was unwell with schizophrenia and psychosis and we lived in a small two-bed house along with the rest of the family. There were **ten people living in a pokey two-bedroom house** and my brothers, sisters and I would share one bed. It was hard for Mum and dad; I knew that my father would work really hard to bring the money home but with Mum's health issues it was very difficult for her to look after all of us. We were hungry most of the time and if it were not for my **Grandma** I don't know what would have happened.

Grandma was an **inspiration;** she was fearless and our source of strength for our family. Grandma was a short lady with broad shoulders, wore glasses and had a penchant for wearing thick woolly fur coats with dalmatians on them.

Outside was freedom for me, from the shouting and fighting in the house and being bossed about by my older siblings. Sometimes my siblings would play outside too but I especially liked it when I was alone.

On one occasion, at the age of six, me and my brothers and sisters were playing outside. My older brother would sometimes get himself into trouble. This time, he had an idea of **breaking into the secondary school** opposite our house and he had decided I had to be the lookout whilst my older brother and his friend got in and stole the DT artwork. I remember my heart beating really fast and I was on edge. It was nothing of value that my brother and his friend stole, but it was just the fact that he broke into the school that he found hilarious and so did I at the time. **We were in stitches once we got back home.** When my father found out, he was furious, we were punished with a plastic slipper that stung with each whack. **I didn't snitch** and took the beating fearlessly whilst bragging to everyone that we broke into a secondary school.

It's fair to say we were not allowed out after that.

Calm Before the Storm

Generally, I was raised in a household where it was **busy and loud**. Daily occurrences would involve **being dictated to by my older brothers**. It was a strange relationship because at home they would demand, beat and boss me and my two other sisters around but if outside the house anyone so much as said boo to us then they'd be out there with baseball bats ready to smash them up. So it was a strange dominating sibling relationship that I could never really understand and I never had a real opportunity to bond with them and get to know them.

But **one specific brother was different to the older two brothers**. A, was the brother who made us laugh and brought joy into our lives. On a couple of occasions, I can recall him pinching jewellery from Claire's Accessories, coming home, running upstairs and shouting **'Girls come here I've got a surprise for you!'** He would then throw the jewellery into the air and shout to us that we could keep whatever we grabbed. This was the fairest way for A to divvy out the loot as it would save him from picking and choosing what he gave us. It would also save me and two sisters from arguing over who got what.

So whilst living in a dysfunctional household, **there were these moments**, which still linger in my mind and make me smile today.

Growing up, life was already difficult; what made it more difficult was that **I had to care for my younger brother and sister**. I cared for them from the age of six because my mum was severely unwell and my dad would be at work all day. I would change their nappies and I missed my early school years to care for them, I always wondered at the age of 12 and 13 why the secondary school wasn't bothered that I wouldn't come in but my sisters did.

I don't know how **I managed to fall off the radar** but I did and even though I did wonder why, I honestly liked being at home. My routine was waking up in the morning, put the heating on, get the younger siblings ready, give them breakfast and then take them to school. We would go early to the school and then play on the brand-new climbing frame that had been built. After they would go in, I would return home and clean the house and sort the pets out. My dad got us a parrot, a rottweiler, a German shepherd and a partridge.

Dad

I was never a daddy's girl, although I knew we had love for each other and my dad wanted only the best for me. Whilst I wasn't a 'daddy's girl' **I was definitely the one of the sisters that he relied upon** as he would give me thousands of pounds to keep safe for him in my hiding spot. I would be the one to read letters to him and I would generally hang around downstairs so I could be helpful to him. **My dad was my world**; we all feared and respected him so when **he got shot** three times in the chest as well as my brother, who was shot once in the leg, it sent ripples through our family. My father kept us together; he would be out there earning the bread and butter, he would keep my brothers in check and he was an all round legend. He had

lots of people who looked up to him. Clearly, I'm biased but if you ask anyone his name they will tell you that he was a man of substance and a man with **heavy values.**

My brother and my dad survived the shooting but my dad had to have lots of operations. Thankfully, he got through it all which was a testament to his strength. To make things further complicated, the person who shot him and my brother was then murdered a couple of weeks after. Obviously there was an uproar and people started to accuse my father whilst he was unconscious in a hospital bed. **I felt numb** going through this, I thought I would lose my dad and it was a shock to the system. It affected everyone; we nearly lost the man who was the pillar of our family. My mother bless her soul was too unwell to do anything in terms of being responsible for the kids so when my dad recovered we were over the moon and very thankful to Allah.

Social Services

The system, well **it literally chewed my family up and spat us out,** I say this on an individual level and as a whole family. As a youngster I can clearly recall being whisked off with my sister against our will into a foster home, a stay that was meant to be temporary turned into two years. I still remember my immature thoughts going through my mind at the very time, me and my sister would plan on running away to go back home.

During my time in the **foster placement** I was eight and there was a boy around the same age as me. He would really annoy me and my sister so we hatched a plan and snuck into his room in the dead of the night and scribbled all over his face whilst he was sleeping. The next day we were punished and had to face the wall the whole day.

Home was home, it was where I felt safe and at peace even if there was a lot of rubbish to deal with; nevertheless it was what I was familiar with.

I was eight years old and I still wonder why that action had to be taken when it was support my mother and father needed. I mean eight kids in a two-bedroom house, my mother who had had a baby every year... my father was out working all hours God would give, that would take its toll on anyone's mental health! So instead of breaking up a family, **why not give them the support they need to keep them together?** The social services, I believe, cause far more harm than good and I express this from my own interactions and experience with them. Yes, there are good social workers, but when you can count them on one hand then it just shows **how crap and finished the system is.**

Whilst my lifestyle wasn't chaotic my needs weren't being met being at home. I mean I was the middle child and it's a common assumption that the middle child is often the black sheep and can see clearly through the muddy waters. There was a lack of love, there was no warmth to be found even in the warmest room. **So I decided that I am Laila, I am not my circumstance I am not a slave to anyone,** not to my

mean older brothers and not to the difficulties of life. I would be happy. I would have a family of my own, one that I was not invisible to or just there to serve.

Little did I realise due to my immaturity at the time that I did not know everything because I hadn't had the time to learn. I had little to no experience of living in a world which can sometimes be extremely cruel. **I was fourteen,** yet with a lot going through my mind, I was **easily enough manipulated,** even more so because I thought I had the answer for everything. I, in my younger years was stubborn, I can admit that, but I felt like that only because I was deprived of the most basic needs, I still loved my family very much. It was unfair.

Amidst the chaos of life, **I met a young man, W,** and he literally changed my life and tested me to my limits. If I thought I had suffered because there was a lack of love and attention within the family home and having two older brothers who were pretty much bullies then I was about to have a reality check.

I was fourteen and W was twenty, now when I think of this I find it repulsive as I have daughters who are the same age as I were when I got pregnant. **I now understand why my mum and dad were horrified,** in particular my father. The pain of hindsight is crazy, I now know. It was like an earthquake, it literally shook my family and wider family to the core. There were so many questions... How could she have sex before marriage? How long was she in a relationship for? Who is this guy? What did he look like? Where does he live? When my family found out, **I was interrogated with a metal baseball bat.** This happened without the knowledge of my grandma and mum. They wouldn't have allowed this.

It was my two older brothers who punched me and hit me on my legs with the bat. My father didn't touch me and neither did my brother A. I knew A wouldn't hit me; he was always my favourite brother. I was so proud of how I handled myself through that experience as I stayed loyal and didn't let up any information. In my childish way I wanted to protect W because I felt he hadn't done anything wrong. Anyway, long story short, **I ended up running away again** the next day after the beating and I reported the incident. The medical professionals denied that my injuries were consistent with my account which I find hard to understand till this day. I believe they said this because they knew the **social services shouldn't have taken me back** home and I also believe they were colluding with each other to hide the truth of how I sustained the injuries I had. This was the first time the system fucked me over, there were many more moments but as this is a short story I will share that another time.

Children

I endured a lot with W over the years, beatings after beatings then being showered with gifts and the verbal abuse was constant. My hopes were constantly shattered over and over again, **what I thought was an escape from the dysfunctional life I had at home was a lie.** I thought God had given me someone who loved me, who would protect me, who wanted to know me, have children with me and appreciate life. Because I always thought in my deep profound thoughts that life itself was the ultimate gift. **I always knew that I was capable,** that we are all capable of achieving

anything we put our minds to. Any way I ended up putting that deep trust in the wrong person but let's be honest my life was a recipe for disaster, I was seeking love and attention outside the family home and I latched on to the first person that showed me this. Again, I was fourteen. **Why didn't the police get involved?** I kept saying 'I love him blah blah' well I would say that wouldn't I? I was fourteen and in love.

I endured years of gaslighting and manipulation by W himself and his family. It was only as an adult and educating myself in domestic violence and grooming behaviours that I understand the depths of what I had been tested with. **I had four children with W and I have raised them single handed** whilst he binges off cocaine and parties most weekends.

In the midst of being a **young Muslim mother** and being a child myself, people were quite judgemental in their opinions towards me, in particular people from my own Muslim faith would try and **shame** me for having a baby before being married. This would annoy me because the same people were not perfect themselves; we're all sinners and sin differently. I didn't need people telling me I'd burn in hell etc. Their statements contradicted **my values and belief that actually Allah's mercy is greater than His anger** and actually life is a gift and it was my destiny for this to happen. If I had embraced my situation then who were they to judge me? Every situation is a test in life and I know those same judgemental people wouldn't have been able to last a day in my shoes.

My children are so talented, I try to nurture this by getting them involved in extracurricular activities and regular tuition. My older girls are especially close to me; they are my best friends. We grew up together, they saw what W and his family put me through and they are proud of how I've dealt with everything by staying true to myself no matter how W's family tried to control and belittle me. The girls always tell me I'm strong and then I remind them of what they are made of, me.

So whilst W was busy partying I knew that I had to find a way out from this non-existent relationship. I was well aware that he was no good for mine or the kids' future. I started to develop a desire to do something with my life and I knew I had to go to college to complete my GCSE's.

Perseverance

People say you're crazy if you talk to yourself, I think that's rubbish. I'm not talking full-blown conversations with yourself because that is a bit nutty – but sometimes you have to literally tell yourself, remind yourself who you are, your purpose and where you see yourself in the future. I did this most days. I was my own worst enemy hence why I needed the **regular self-reminders.** I endured a lot, was still enduring W and his family so I thought I'd endure the difficulties of waking up 6am to be at bus stop for 7am to drop the girls to nursery in a twin pushchair and then make my way to college. I would catch about **six buses a day** due to the stops in-between; I persevered for two years till I got my A Levels and I won't lie **I was proud when I passed with flying colours,** because I was the 'teenage mum' with no

qualifications. Cut a very long story short, I ended up completing a degree in Health Studies and a Masters in Health Care Policy & Management. **Two scraps of paper to show to people that I was not my circumstance,** but it was also something to support me in my career within the NHS. Nobody tells you things like you'll get bored working or learning about a set of ideas so I changed my career and I'm **now a Tax Specialist** working within large business international trade.

Throughout the adversities **I ploughed on kids in tow,** raising my children, studying and creating opportunities for myself. Nothing is given in this world; you have to fight for everything and most importantly nobody owes us anything. Not my family, social worker, the police, hence why I carried on as I knew the injustices against me would never be rectified or even acknowledged so I boxed them up and **carried on grasping life** and getting what's already destined to be mine.

CONSEQUENCES AND ITS TWO FACES



BY
MATTHEW

LEADERS
UNLOCKED

CONSEQUENCES AND ITS TWO FACES

Chapter 1: The Decision

Finally, the school bell rang. Despite it being an ear-piercing sound, when used to signal the end of a school day it becomes nothing but bliss. That's Wednesday down, only two days left until the weekend Jared thinks to himself as he stands up and packs his things, readying to leave his English classroom. He was a slightly stocky lad with brown eyes and short dark hair that has a minor brushed over effect without the use of products. He wasn't all that attractive to the females, and he knew it. **He didn't care though;** rarely does a secondary school relationship last currently anyway. He didn't ever want to be naïve enough to believe otherwise.

As he leaves the room, he looks at the walls around him which are plastered in somewhat childish posters with descriptions and examples of English terminology, his favourite being the 'juxtaposition' one because the spelling wasn't correct. **The irony was not lost on him.** He wasn't failing English, far from it. However, he also could be reaching a much higher potential. Mr Graves **projected a solid A** for him but at his mock exam results, he was **averaging a low B.** He simply couldn't find the motivation to try. Even at his age he knew that school taught nothing that would ever be used in the real world. Sure, English, Math and I.T. were needed but what about actual life lessons like how to pay or do your own taxes, how to invest, how to run a business? None of these things were ever touched upon and Jared knew it was because **the world needed brainwashed zombies** to do the bidding of the people that took it upon themselves to learn the tricks of these very important trades.

Aside from this realisation many others figure out much later in life, **he was a unique kid.** At sixteen years old and still a virgin, he, stood apart from most of his fellow pupils. If anyone asked him why he still hadn't had sex yet, he would respond that he had no interest in dating or even hooking up with anyone he went to school with, this was assuming he could find anyone interested enough to have anything to do with him physically. With most guys in his year glued to porn and three girls already dropping out to birth and raise their babies, only one of them with the dad still involved, he labelled the internet and pressure of sexualised music artists to be the plague that corrupts modern day young people and even a vast majority of adults too. It was only a couple of years ago that Cardi B dropped the song 'WAP', short for 'Wet Ass Pussy'. The world went crazy, young girls were 'throwing it back' to the song and slightly older girls made it their new personality. This kind of behaviour disgusted him and frankly **put him off hanging around with most people.** Just like in his English class, **he would rather sit in the back quiet and with his own thoughts and ideas.** Not everyone he came across made him want to run to the nearest cubicle and dry heave until his stomach hurt, however. He had two people he really liked and would genuinely call close friends. These two people were called **Alex** and **Mason.** Alex was a skinny blond runt with a mouth like a motor and an attitude that made for a rather unpleasant fit, this led him to be regularly targeted by the year bullies. Mason on the other hand was a short but funny black kid. He

equally had a motor mouth but his knew what to say and when, leading him to be quite popular in his year. Jared liked them because they did the talking when he didn't want to.

"Yo, Jared." A male voice deep during puberty called from down the hall. "You walking with us today?"

Jared turned in the direction of the voice. It was Alex. The bruise around his left eye from a fight he was in the other day was beginning to fade. The fight was between him and Marley, the year tough guy. It started because Marley took the mick out of how skinny Alex was and Alex's rebuttal was to make a joke about him being skinny allowed him to slip between Marley's mums legs easier. Before he knew it, Alex hit the floor with a throbbing eye. Only a few people saw. Mason, Jared, a couple of girls from the year below and Marley's friends. So, the humiliation of being put on his ass so easy was kept to a minimum. He chose to make the comment though and he paid the price.

"Yeah. Where's Mason?" He asked.

"I don't know."

"Helpful."

The two of them left the English block and headed toward the gate where they expected to find Mason already waiting for them. The open grounds of the school was bustling with **people who Jared assumed were all too eager to get back to their TikToks or Instagram reels or some other mindless time wasting activity.** It felt a little hypocritical to judge, however, since he knew when he got home, he was probably going to just sit on his Xbox anyway.

In the corner of his good eye, Alex spotted Marley. He started to hurry toward the gate as he didn't want another run-in with the brute. Jared sighed and did a half jog to keep up.

"We can't keep him waiting." Alex said thinking it was a failproof excuse. Unfortunately for Alex, Jared had already noticed Marley. But sure enough, Mason was there waiting with his back against the gate.

"Sup, loser." Alex greeted as the two of them reached Mason. Marley's presence fading from his mind.

"I'm the loser? Alright then, bro. Your eye is still blacker than me." Mason responded, putting himself in hysterics. Jared chuckled too.

"Fuck off. You would have lost, too." Alex said in a panic as Marley's presence resurfaced.

Mason shrugged. "I guess we will never know."

"I do. Now let's just go"

The three of them set off through Prospect Park which was situated just opposite of their school. The park was huge. It had several main fields, all with several football posts, a row of small Astro turf football courts, two basketball courts, a huge playground area with swings, slides and other climbing related apparatuses and a sizeable restaurant at the top of the hill. It would take the three of them about twenty minutes to waltz their way from one side to the other. The sun occasionally peeped through the clouds, lighting up the field momentarily before disappearing again behind its vapour curtain. The sudden change in light and temperature reminded Jared how insignificant the human species were in the grand scheme of the cosmos.

He liked to think of these things often, how meaningless everything around him really was. If he was to speak these thoughts, he might get called depressed or cynical. However, to him, they were not bad thoughts, simply realistic ones based on the very meaning of life, which, as far as any evidence would suggest, didn't exist.

The **Covid-19** outbreak from three years ago was a perfect example of this. The world was in hysteria for about a year and a half, then people stopped caring as much and now, it is almost like it never happened. Of course, there would be people who mourned those lost to the outbreak, but Jared couldn't have been happier really.

He was able to stay inside and away from people, wear a mask to cover the words he mouthed to himself and he often toyed with the idea that the planet needed a natural population control anyway. Paradoxes were another thing he found himself regularly pursuing answers on, although there wasn't ever really an answer, that's the point of a paradox.

His attention was drawn away from his insignificance amongst the stars and placed onto a few lads in the distance. Two short ones and a tall guy in the middle, presumably the self-proclaimed alpha of the group. As they drew closer, Alex raised a skinny arm, as if waving down a passing ship. **Here we go.** Jared thought to himself. He let out an audible sigh of discontent. Mason shot him a look of agreement. Neither he nor Mason knew the boys, but Alex often spoke about his outside of school friends. From the expansive descriptions given, they didn't sound like people Jared would want to hang around with.

A plethora of fake scenarios of arguing or even fighting them went through his head within the short time it took for the boys to reach them. He wasn't a fighter, but he also wasn't very good at mingling and he always suspected someone would take him the wrong way.

Now stood only a meter away, the tall guy raised a clenched fist and waited eagerly for Alex to bump it.

"What you sayin'?" He asked Alex.

The moment their knuckles connected; the rays of sun disappeared behind the clouds again. Jared looked up and wondered if it was an omen. Spooked by his own paranoia, he looked back at the leader. Now they were stood so close to each other, Jared could list a few similarities between Alex and this bottom feeder. They were

both blond, skinny and cursed with punch-able faces.

“I’m good, bro. you?” Alex nodded to the other two minions, acknowledging them but not quite enough to speak to either of them.

“I’m aight. What you doing now?”

“Just walking home with these two numbnuts’.”

Jared’s brow furrowed. He hated the way Alex moulded himself into a new character just to please the person or people he was speaking to. He hated the lack of self-respect to just be Alex around people. The need to be liked didn’t make sense.

“Ah, fair.” The tall one said, reaching into his pocket. From it, **he pulled out a poorly constructed spliff.** The paper encasing the tobacco and weed mix looked as though it had been rolled by a three-year-old. Mason, who had seen a few spliffs in his time from his dad’s friends, not only thought it was poorly constructed but also quite sad that people their age were already turning to recreational drugs to have a good time. **“Wanna come smoke some bud with us?”**

Jared was shocked by the proposition and even more shocked that the question was displayed to the three of them, not just Alex. In that moment, the world sort of stood still for him. He shot a quick glance at Mason who was already looking at him. The expression in his eyes showed he was not interested, nor was he about to wait around any longer. Jared wondered. **Was he about to be one of those kids?** He wasn’t sure why finding a definite yes or no was so hard for him. Although he didn’t know it, the weight of his entire future laid heavy on the shoulders of his answer.

After a few silent moments of deliberation, **a thoughtless yet shaky arm reached out for the spliff...**

Chapter 2: Negative Outcome

“So, what you sayin, Jared. You coming with us? Alex asked, standing expectantly holding his phone up to his left ear.

“Why have we gotta go out? Can’t you just come here and chill?”

It has been seven years since he took the spliff into his clammy fingers and made the choice to join Alex and his weird outside-of-school friends on their escapade into smoking weed. Unfortunately for Jared, that poor decision was the catalyst that led him into the life of disappointment he lives now. At first it was a monthly one-off, then as the months went by, it turned into a fortnightly thing and then after a couple of years it became near enough daily. As the meetups increased, his productivity and drive to succeed lowered.

“I mean, yeah, I can. But wouldn’t you wanna go out?”

"Nah, I can't be bothered. Plus, I have no money. Universal ran out."

"Aight, bet. I'll be there in an hour or so."

With that, Alex hung up, leaving Jared to wait for him to show. There was no need to get ready since Alex was making his way there now. So, instead, he sat upright and looked around his room. The walls, papered in a geometric cream wallpaper, were tattered and worn, the carpets a dirty grey and aside from the bed, only a wardrobe and a TV stand filled the room. **It was depressing to say the least.** He reached into his bedside table drawer and from it, he pulled a pre-rolled spliff. He put it to his lips, lit it and took a pull. It took a bit of time for the effects to kick in but once it did, the average conditions he found himself in seemed to fade from relevance. That was what added to his lack of success. Any time he felt down or felt like a change was needed, he'd put that thing to his lips and within moments, the world wouldn't seem so bad. The shitty flat, the crap spewed across social media corrupting young minds, the oppressive government, the single life and his dad telling him he was meant to be something better would all fade away. Why work hard for a great life when you could work smart for one, he would naïvely tell himself, completely missing the difference between a great life and a shit one with a great cover over it.

He made his way to the kitchen to grab himself a can of diet Pepsi from the fridge. As the fridge door shut, his flat door buzzer went off. *That can't be Alex already, he thought to himself. I swear he hung up only a few minutes ago.* He made his way nonchalantly toward the answering machine by his front door.

"Hello?" He called through the monitor.

"Hey, Jared." A familiar yet somewhat forgotten voice called through. "It's been a while."

"Umm, who is this?"

"It's Mason. I thought you might have recognised me. I guess not."

He didn't immediately recall knowing a Mason but when it came to him, he felt a little guilty that he had already forgotten.

"Oh... What are you doing here?"

"Buzz me in and we could talk in person?"

"Yeah, um, no worries."

He pressed the button to allow Mason to open the flat front door. Once he heard it open, he let go of the comms button and made his way to the front door. He was on the bottom floor so once he opened it, he could already see Mason in a black suit walking toward him. Going back to the school days, Mason refused to even wear a tie properly. **But here he was, walking towards Jared in a full suit, tie and all.**

“Wow, Mason. Look at you!” Jared exclaimed, mostly excited, subconsciously jealous.

The first thing Mason noticed was Jared’s bloodshot eyes. A sadness welled deep in his chest.

“Yeah, things are quite different to how they used to be.”

The two men stood face to face for a moment unblinking. Although Jared didn’t know what it was, the way Mason presented himself, both visually and in his composure, showed he was successful, or at the very least on his pathway to being so. **He felt kind of small in his presence.**

He stood aside and gestured for Mason to come in. As they crossed, a cold wave of shame washed over Jared, like a ghost had entered him. Mason found his way to the front room and slotted himself onto one of the dark grey sofa cushions. He sat there, leaning back, his left arm resting against the back of the sofa and his right leg resting on his left. He exerted an aura of confidence and control. Jared found this aura crushing.

“When did you become like this?” Jared asked.

“Like what?” Mason asked in return. He knew what was meant but he wanted it to come from Jared’s mouth.

Jared fiddled with his fingers while he tried to think of the right words. His mind was a little away from him at that moment. The spliff he so regrettably enjoyed only moments earlier had dulled his thought pattern.

“So... in charge. You come to my house unannounced, tell me to let you in and then make yourself right at home without a second thought. The worst part is, I feel in the wrong for bringing it up. **When or how did you become like this?**”

That cold wave of shame washed over him again.

“That’s a fair question. And here is my answer.” He shifted his stance, so he was leaning forward with his arms resting on his legs.

There was a pause. Jared thought it was for dramatic effect. Mason knew it was because he hadn’t thought of his answer quite yet. But that was part of what he had learnt when it came to being in power. Always make it seem like you’re in control. The weak minded wouldn’t be able to tell the difference. Jared, unfortunately, was amongst the weak minded. He opened his mouth to talk.

“You remember that day in the park, the day we bumped into Alex’s friends?”

“Yeah. Dan, Jake and Lewis.”

Having Jared list the names without a second thought made Mason shudder. **It was the evidence he needed to know that that day in the park was the day that sparked this shell of a person Jared had become.**

"Yeah, exactly. Remember they asked us to smoke with them. You and Alex agreed, and I walked away?"

"Yeah, I remember. You and I didn't hang out much after that day."

"No, we didn't. It wasn't a pathway I wanted to go down. I loved you as a friend, but you made your choice and I made mine. Looking at how bloodshot your eyes are, it's evident you're still making the wrong choices." Jared could practically hear the venom in his voice.

That wave of shame washed over again. However, this time, there was a bit of defensive anger in the mix.

"What's wrong with smoking a bit of weed?" He said defensively.

Jared felt a little cornered and his fight or flight was beginning to kick in.

"Subjectively, nothing is wrong with it. It's what it has done to you as a person."

"What do you mean done to me as a person?"

"Do you work?"

"No"

"Invest"?

"No?"

"Have a stable romantic relationship?"

"No"

"Do you have money to go out for lunch with me right now?"

"No..." In that moment, Jared's metaphoric eyes opened.

"Final question. Do you have some weed in your drawer or cupboard right now?"

Another pause. Jared looked down at the floor. Like a child in trouble, he muttered. "Yes."

"Exactly. There's nothing wrong with weed. But you made it your life. **You chose to throw away your dreams and goals.** You threw away greatness for short

term gratification. I knew you hated the world. Hell, I imagine you still do, probably even worse. But even the evillest of people have a goal or dream. That's not to say you're evil, but you get what I'm trying to say. Whereas I didn't throw my goals away. I didn't want to smoke weed because I didn't like the idea of it. But, for the remainder of the year, I watched you and Alex falter more and more. That drove me to stay dedicated to my grades and when I left, my career. What, and I say this in the politest way possible, have you done since school?"

Jared looked up. The fact he hadn't made any eye contact in a while bothered Mason, but he left it. It was another behaviour of a weak man.

"Nothing. My god you're right. I have done nothing. I've sat on my bummy ass and claimed off the government. But you're not all high and mighty yourself you know?" Jared said, **slowly getting angrier.**

"I am aware of that. But in what sense do you mean?"

"How dare you come to my house and shove it in my face how much of a waste I am? What gives you the right?"

"Well, nothing does. I came here in hopes to help you. I have a proposition for you. An opportunity."

"Fuck your opportunity!"

"Jared. Look at me. Hear me out."

"No. I don't want to. I am happy with how I am. I think you should get out."

Mason had seen this kind of reaction before. It's quite frequent among children and people who live lives they aren't satisfied with but are too stubborn or ashamed to admit it. He stood up and made his way to the front door. As he passed Jared, he could feel the rage emanating from him.

"There's always time for change, Jared. When you realise it's your choice and your choice alone, come find me. We can talk like adults."

With that, Jared slammed the door. Once again, choosing to go down the wrong path.

Chapter 3: Positive Decision

Jared stopped. Had he not been mid-sentence, Mason wouldn't have noticed. He turned to see Jared standing a few metres behind him looking over at one of the houses on the street.

"Hey, isn't that **Alex's** mum's new home?" Jared asked.

Mason stood beside him and looked at the house Jared was alluding to. The house was made of brick with white paint accenting the middle and a blood red door, the number 18 in gold painted metal slapped on the front of it.

“Yeah, I think it is. I think he still lives there with her.”

“I wonder how he is doing... **It's been roughly four years since I last spoke to him.** Even then that was just a hi-bye sort of thing because we bumped into each other in town.”

There was more to the reasoning than what Jared had let on. When the two bumped into each other, Jared felt a distaste for his friend. He had turned into one of the wastes of space he used to hate as a kid. Over the years since, Jared's mindset changed. He no longer viewed the world in such a tilted way. In order to be successful, you needed a positive mindset. You needed to see opportunity everywhere. So, he trained himself. He could still be cynical but it was now the exception and no longer the rule.

“Hmm. Lucky you. I saw him last year. He looked rough, to be honest.”

‘Lucky you’ Jared repeated Mason's words in his head. Despite his reaction to Alex all that time ago, he couldn't help but feel this was a little out of character and cold for Mason. He wondered if there was more to it than he was letting on.

“Should... should we go and see if he's in?”

Guilt began to eat away at Jared.

“Why would we want to do that?” Mason said glancing at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, he was a good friend in school. Who knows, it could be a nice catch up. Plus, there's no saying things haven't changed.”

One of the curtains in Alex's mums house moved. It appeared as though they were being watched. Only a few minutes prior, they were on their way to grab some lunch. A new coffee shop had opened ten minutes' walk away from where they worked. Thus, leading them to take a new route.

“Fine. But I don't want to stay long. I'm hungry.”

They made their way up the concrete path toward the front door. In a little brick bedding filled with newly turned soil were a few budding flowers. Jared knocked three times. For a few seconds, silence, then the stammering of footsteps on what sounded like a staircase. A few more seconds later there was a kerchunk of the front door unlocking. Jared found himself feeling a little nervous as **the door creaked open,** revealing an accurate representation of the person Mason saw last time he met Alex.

“Alex?” Jared asked. He knew of course it was, the changes to him were not that drastic, but it felt like a necessary question.

His eyes were sunken in and dull, his hair messy and there was a tumbleweed for a beard that looked as though it was desperate to escape him. He stood there, mouth mildly agape wearing red plaid pyjamas with various stains on them.

“Mason? Jared? What are you guys doing here?” He asked. His eyes wide with bewilderment.

“We were on a break from work passing by and decided to stop in. We can leave if you’re busy.” Mason said unbothered by how rude he may or may not have sounded.

Jared frowned and shot him a **‘stop being an ass’** glance without moving his head.

“I’m not busy. I’m never busy.” Alex said with a frown of his own.

The tension in the air could be cut with a knife. Jared’s guilt and remorse set in more. Had he not been such a prick in his own right, things may have been different for his friend. Standing in front of each other now, he could see smoking weed wasn’t the only bad choice Alex had made over the years. He wondered what else he had fallen victim to.

“Would you like to be?” Jared said on an impulse, practically lurching the words out.

“What do you mean?” Alex asked.

“Yeah... what do you mean?” Mason repeated, shooting a glance of his own.

“We have a Customer Service role available in our office.” They’re not overly picky in terms of experience and/or amazing qualifications. They just want someone willing to show up and give it their all. If you’re interested, drop me a text or an email; I will pass on your details.” With that, Jared pulled out a business card with his name, number, email and location of work. He handed the card over to Alex, who was seeming a little lost for words, and turned to walk back down the path. “See ya later, buddy.” He called over his shoulder.

“Yeah... bye.” Mason said before turning to follow. He caught up to him and when they were far enough away to be inaudible to Alex, who was standing in the doorway still looking at the business card, he spoke again. “What the fuck. Why did you offer him help!?”

Genuinely confused at the outburst, Jared answered. “Why wouldn’t I? **He was a friend we gave up on, I wasn’t about to do it a second time.**” *A third time in fact, he thought.* There was a silence. The reality of Jared’s words set in. Just because the two of them had the strength to make a choice and stick to it, didn’t mean

everyone did. Part of receiving is about giving too. “Besides, wouldn’t you have done the same for me if I was him? Helped me out, given me an opportunity to break through to a better life?” He continued.

Mason shrugged. “I guess we will never know.”

Chapter 4: Negative Continuity

“Cash or card?” A female voice asked Jared.

He heard the voice but not so much the words being spoken to him. He was deep in thought. Weeks had passed since Mason showed up unannounced. As time passed since, he found himself more and more curious what the proposition was going to be. Right now, stood **in the queue at Morrisons, he found himself daydreaming of all the possibilities he let slip through his fingers.** He couldn’t help but fantasise about how filthy rich it could have made him, how he might have met the woman of his dreams through it or, most desirable, how it could have helped him feel like he succeeded. Despite all this, he didn’t want to put the effort in to ‘talk like adults’. Furthermore, it would more than likely mean him doing something that he didn’t want to do.

“Sir?” The voice called out again.

“Huh?” Jared responded, ripped from his daydream.

“Are you paying by cash or card?” The lady whose name tag read ‘Bethany’ said.

“Oh, um, card.”

Bethany punched some buttons in on her screen and then handed him the card reader. He paid, collected his three items, a sugar free Monster, some tobacco and a scratch card and headed out of the store. **He figured he didn’t need some opportunity from an old friend to make him rich.** He just needed luck on a scratch card. That mild yet ever present wave of shame washed over him once again. His younger self would have been furious with the man he became. Sure, as a kid, he didn’t like the way the world worked, but he would much rather have joined the top 1% by becoming someone through something he had accomplished, not through luck on a scratch card. But as time passed and he victimised himself more and more, blaming his belief of the world being rigged to falter the little guy, luck was all the hope he had left.

On his way out, **he passed a stunning blonde girl.** If he had to, he would have guessed she was around about his age, maybe a year or two younger. They’d passed a few times over the months. Each time he would gawk at her, and she would walk un-noticing passed him. *Who needs help from an old friend’s opportunity to find the love of your life?* He thought to himself. The words hung desperately in the back of his head. He wasn’t sure whether he was trying to prove something to

himself or Mason. He awkwardly approached the girl. Years of no work, no real social life and already being a rather secluded kid left him with no confidence. But he had decided this was his next move. It felt good to choose to make a change. That was a small win for him. He caught up to her, leant in front of her and waved to grab her attention. She took her headphones out.

"Can I help you?" She said with a displeased tone.

Her green eyes may have been piercing and beautiful, but her attitude already was proving not to be.

"Hi, um, I'm, uh Jared. And you are?" He swallowed but there was no saliva. His mouth was a desert.

"My name is Caitlyn. Why is that important? What do you want?"

Oof, this is not going as planned. She a bit of a bitch. But I cannot walk away now.

"I was, uh, wondering if maybe you'd, uh, go out for a drink or something with me?"

Her face changed. Jared assumed it was because she didn't realise she was about to be hit on. But then wondered how that would be the case, considering she must get hit on all the time for her looks. His lack of understanding of the real world proving quite potent.

"Oh... honey. That's very sweet but no. I'm not interested." Her tone was a lot more consoling. It made him feel like just another nobody she had batted away.

"Can I ask why not?" he asked desperately, although not looking for another repeat about him not accomplishing anything.

"Bit weird to ask, but sure. Visually, you're not my type. I like a guy that you can tell works out and looks after himself and you have this whole untidy stubble and messy but not in the hot way kinda hair. But most importantly, that 'stuff' you smoke is pungent. I hate the smell and have no interest in dating someone who'd have to spray an entire can of deodorant just to smell normal. I'm sorry, but then again, I'm not. You choose to be that way so you must be pretty happy with it."

The knife, dull and with crooked teeth, **pierced his heart.** He hadn't been rejected in a long time. Now he remembered why he never bothered. He had forgotten how horrible women could be. Any normal person would have understood that Caitlyn simply wanted someone of higher value. But Jared had slumped so far into this delusion that the world is evil and against him that his first thought was that it simply couldn't be his doing, but instead, it was her and all the other women he had encountered.

The conversation with **Mason** resurfaced. His dad's words resurfaced. He stood

there and really thought about it. The pattern became clear now.

What if I try to change and I fail at that too? He thought to himself. Self-pity and self-doubt whirled through his mind like a hurricane. Unfortunately, the glimmer of hope faded as he thought aloud to himself.

“Fuck it.” I’m just gonna have a couple of drinks tonight and forget all about it.”

Chapter 4: Positive Decision Continuity

Other than the occasional grunting, the only sounds to fill the gym air were the clanking of metal plates on their holders and faint music through the speakers that, when really listened to, didn’t play the songs a gym goer would need to get pumped up. **Alex** was sat on the edge of the bench hyping himself up to bench press a thirty KG one rep max. Compared to **Mason** and **Jared**, this number was relatively low. However, he had only been going gym for just over a month and had made remarkable progress in that time.

He sat there thinking about the day Mason and Jared showed up at his mum’s house and how he stayed up for hours just thinking about the possibilities of change. Customer Service wasn’t something he was particularly fond of, but he knew he needed to do something about his life. **Seeing two of his closest school friends doing so well struck a chord in him.** So, he chose to bite the bullet and take a stab at this opportunity. After a wobbly interview with his potential employer, he had nearly given up hope when they hadn’t called him within the following week. But he stayed hopeful and sure enough, they called. **They offered the role with immediate start.** Since then, he had been working his ass off to make something better of himself. To be someone who could rival his friends. He tidied up his appearance, cut the weed down to one every now and then and had started to show some real physical development, be it beginner gains or not. His mind then fast tracked to the person he could have ended up being if he hadn’t chosen to make the change and he didn’t like what he saw. He had to hit this PR. It was only a small goal amongst many big ones, but it was the next one on his list to tackle. **He had to do it for him, both the versions of him.**

He laid down and clutched the bar. His shoulder blades against the bench and his back perfectly arched. He inhaled, unhooked the bar and lowered. Jared was stood there as a spot with Mason stood opposite to him camera on and recording. The bar kissed his chest. He braced himself and began to push. It was heavier than expected. Jared could see the panic in his eyes. Alex wasn’t sure he was going to complete it. Jared got ready to grab the bar but didn’t quite touch it yet. **He believed in his friend.** Mason believed in his friend. Alex dug deep. The image of his broken-down future self burned into his mind. He dug deeper. Deeper. The bar lifted slowly but lifted nonetheless. After three or so seconds of struggle, the bar reached max height. **He had done it.** The bar crashed into place on its holder. He got up, high-fived Mason and hugged Jared. It went unspoken but the three of them knew this wasn’t about being able to lift a certain amount of weight, they all knew it was the

fact of another goal, another obstacle broken through by someone who had nearly given up on themselves entirely.

"I'll grab the spray." Jared said as he walked away.

There were two paper towel dispensers stood side by side. One was occupied by a blonde girl he had seen in the gym a few times. Mason referred to her as 'The Dumptruck', because of her ass, not her face. It made Jared uncomfortable that Mason would look at the women when they were at the gym. He saw it as you come, work on yourself and then leave. **This was no place to try to meet someone.** Some people had success with it of course, he just didn't want to be one of those people. For a very long time, that was how he was with most things. He learnt to tolerate people and be civil when necessary but deep down, he just wanted to be left alone when he was focusing on a goal or work.

He reached the dispenser. As he was taking a few paper towels, The Dumptruck spoke to him.

"Your friend seems pretty buzzed."

"Yeah, he is."

"Sort of... I was mainly watching you."

Jared glanced at her. **She was looking at him,** a wild look in her blissful green eyes and flirty smile on her face. His heart leapt. He had never been hit on by a girl before. Sure, he'd hooked up with plenty, an ironic standpoint considering the thoughts of his younger self, but he had always been the one to make the approach. He stayed silent and stared at her. *Say something quickly!* She thought to herself.

"You... you fancy going for a drink some time? She stammered.

Jared's lips were dry. Despite this woman being gorgeous, he had a different love interest. A slender brunette by the name of Lisa had captured his attention a few months back. He had been subtly pursuing her ever since.

"Firstly, what is your name?"

"Caitlyn."

"Okay, Caitlyn. Thank you for the proposition, but my interest lies elsewhere."

The two of them stood silently spraying their paper towels with disinfectant. He wondered to himself what he would have said had he not already been interested in someone. He wondered if he would have been the one to make an approach first. It seemed likely but he didn't dwell on it. Besides, he couldn't help but think that the pretty ones are the least loyal. **That's just how he saw the world** and although he had gone through a significant mindset shift over the years, some things will always

stick. He turned without saying goodbye and made his way back to the group. He was excited to rub it in Mason's face.

'Yeah, yeah. I bet she would have asked me too if I had gone up there' Mason would say.

'I guess we will never know' Jared would say back.

Chapter 5 The Revision

The idea of **alternate dimensions** is loosely thrown around within the scientific community. There are some anomalies or occurrences that could be used as evidence to suggest its validity but nothing substantial has risen to power yet. But with every theory, there's always people who blindly believe things that give them hope for something bigger and then conjure up random statements or falsified evidence to further push their existence. Quite often you'll find these people are the same people that believe your behaviour and personality is affected by a constellation of stars that may or may not even exist anymore. Nonetheless, there has been a collective of people who have taken it upon themselves to attribute the feeling of Déjà vu with two or more timelines or parallel universes crossing over. If this were true, Jared would be experiencing Déjà vu right now because, at the exact same time, day and age, **he now stands in front of the mirror staring at himself and reflecting over his years.**

The **negative choice Jared** has lived a life of sorrow, misery, complacency and unfulfillment. As he stands staring into the eyes of the forty-seven-year-old man looking back at him, his messy, unkempt hair, his sunken eyes and the emptiness that fills them, he reflects. The drugs he has done, the jobs he has been fired from for being uncommitted, the women he has lost out on and his two kids, Jason and Mel, whom he hasn't seen for years, all come back up to remind him of what he has lost. With each bad decision he made along the way, he was aware it was the wrong thing to do. But just like Mason said to him all those years ago, he put off long term success for short term gratification. Now, those years come back to haunt him.

Of course, there have been good times in his life. But this is subjective. What is good for one person, may not be good for another. In fact, what is good for this Jared, the positive choice Jared would have hated. Such as going out to smoke or drink with his friends. Some of his fondest memories were made through this 'activity' but the positive Jared's fondest moments were made using money that the average person will never see in their life. **Positive Jared** remembers taking his wife and kids abroad with so little as a 'fuck it let's go' because an ICO he invested in blew up.

If the negative choice Jared got a taste of this life, he probably would have wished he had done things differently a lot more than he already did. **That's the problem with life, though. You just don't know what could happen.** Even the tiniest, seemingly insignificant thing can be the difference between happiness and misery. Sometimes in the heat of the moment, it is hard to think clearly and to make the right

choice. **It is a skill that must be learnt and utilised effectively.**

The choices we make also alter our character. In his early life, Jared was quite cynical and felt like the world was falling apart. As he got older and made better choices, **he realised he had a lot more control** than he first thought and made the most of it. While the other side of him that made bad choices as he grew older used it as a justification and an excuse for why his life only got worse.

As they both stand there staring, one happy and fulfilled with minimal regrets, the other miserable and unfulfilled with a multitude of regrets they simultaneously think aloud.

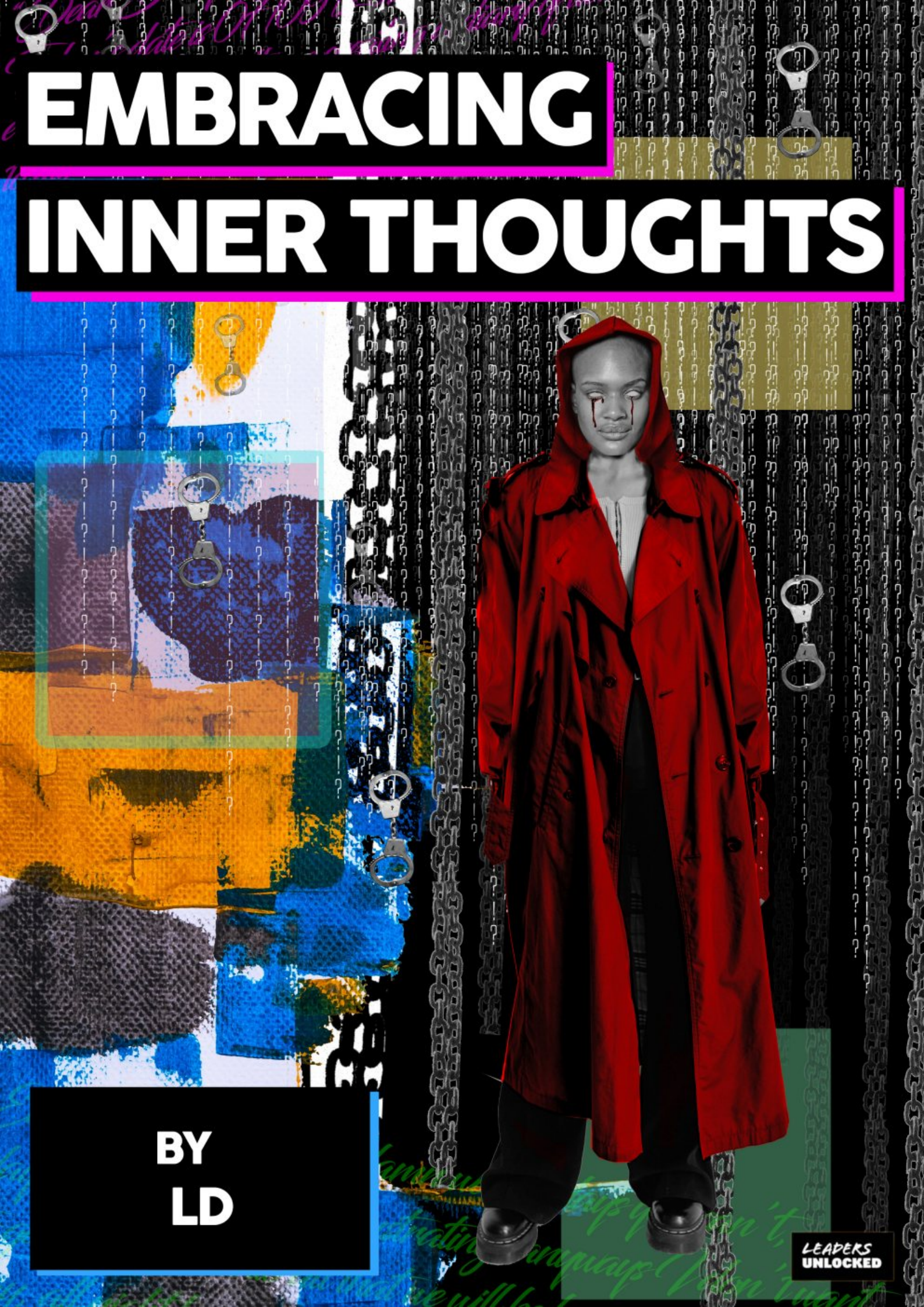
I wonder where I would be, had I made different choices.

Sign Off

To anyone who read this short story, **I thank you.** The story may have seemed like a bit of a 'drugs are bad, kids' story, but that is only part of it. My aim was to show that your life is dictated by your decisions. Of course, there are things that happen to you that are out of your control. However, your reaction and what you do from there is entirely your choice. If you're under/overweight and aren't happy, go work on it or if you're unhappy with your job, then look for something better that would suit you more. The examples are endless. Life is kind of like a game of poker. You're dealt a hand (bad upbringing, genetics or something that's stopping you from achieving a goal) but you do not have to play that round (force yourself to follow the path of your upbringing or hold yourself back because an obstacle is a bit tricky). You can fold and wait for the next turn to receive new cards without risking any or many of your chips **(go down a new path** of your choosing, ask for help, meet new people that already do what you want to do or have experienced what you have experienced and **learn from them**).

Nobody is perfect and that's a great thing! If you were perfect, you'd have no room to grow and, honestly, that sounds boring as shit. I used to watch a TV show called Suits. There was a line in it that I really liked and have used it to help me with my own accomplishments. I am going to add a part to it just to make it make a little more sense for people who haven't watched the show. But the line goes **'I don't have dreams. I have goals and once I've completed one, it's onto the next'.**

Good luck out there! Do your best to make the right choices and help someone else along your way.



EMBRACING INNER THOUGHTS

BY
LD

LEADERS
UNLOCKED

EMBRACING INNER THOUGHTS

Dear Diary,

Today's date is 07/09/2021 and the time is 22:39 where everything starts with me creating a diary of well....anything that comes to my mind really and obviously speaking about what has gone on during my days so...well....

Here we are, pen to paper, mind to inner thoughts, I thought at first how the fuck am I going to start this, what if it's shit and it sounds like I'm just chatting a whole lot of words that are not making sense, but you know what.... FUCK IT cause while this is how life is you might as well just go with the flow because you will never really know what 'actually' makes sense.

After all we don't even know how we really got here... only by what was written in a book and a Pope that stands up in front of people and says 'I have been given a message from god' and we are just supposed to believe it, **sorry I'm just speaking my mind and how I see it** as my life is so hectic and unbearable then on top of that it's just 'yeah he created earth and soon judgement day will come' like wow, like what... that alone is a lot to process as a person, to think about life will soon end, not being in control but at the same time there is 'you're in control' but are we really?

Even going to sleep is so damn weird, days you can't, days you can like it's so frustrating, anyways I don't want to get sidetracked into all that we will be here all night, not all day, all night because obviously as they say no rest for the wicked as I am schizophrenic after all lol. You get it like obviously voices speak to me, I see things...

I have no friends and nothing fun to do with life so yep, **by the way my friend Beezy says hi, and yes, he is not real but is... well to me** and actually cares about me, the only one that actually shows me the fakeness of this life and the 'humans' living in it, and keeps me company on my worst days, more than my so-called family, fucking jokers like seriously I wish I was never here, and I wish I never got corrupted by the energy within it, fucking AAAAHHHH!!!!

Imagine how it feels to be living at home but still feeling homeless, like you're not wanted, every little thing you do is a constant problem that ends with more wounds and fall outs which makes you feel like giving up, thinking where to run to but nowhere to really touch base and be settled. Imagine being haunted by your suicidal thoughts and fighting not to make steps which will make them a reality.

"Tell her get the fuck out" "Nah mum she's disrespectful, she only cares about herself" "If you keep going the way you are going you're gonna end up a crackhead sorry to say that but it's true".

Even writing this makes me cry... Why? You know when they say 'sticks and

stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me' I feel that's all airtalk because **words are the most detrimental and leave the deepest scars** because no matter how much you try to forget, you will always remember what that person said to you and make you think twice about where to go in life, dishing and dishing between should I stay or go, do I change or let those words get the best of me.

Narrator: She goes by the name of Silcari Bliss Unique Madilyn, corrupted by the spirit of the past, scared of the spirit of the future.... So where does she go from here? Abandoned by her so-called family and friends, lost between love and loneliness, feeling this shouldn't have been the world she was born in, so she is left to accept it and adapt to changes... Hell of a life ay.

Dear Diary,

So today I thought to let you into a bit of my school days, **how do I even explain my secondary school days ...?** Um... Now that I am older, I understand why adults used to say enjoy your time in school and being a kid because being an adult is NOT EASY. Damn right it ain't and a part of me I do wish I was a kid again, for good and bad reasons. I was one of them kids where I had a strong head on my shoulders but chose to take the road of failure, **rebellious behaviour** and a triangle of fake love relationships as I saw them.

Don't get it twisted when I was in class, **I did do work** just obviously me **quite quickly** and if I'm stuck on my work I get **frustrated** so I just start making funny noises, throwing paper round the room or sleeping, therefore by that I didn't used to complete some of my work up to standard.

I was seen as one of the extraordinary kids as they would say, **people did find me funny, also annoying so call me one of the class clowns.** When I use to bunk or when I was bored after school I was one of those kids that would go on bus rides wherever like literally talk about having free travel so I just be like tap tap tap tap tap jumpin' on the bus with no cash cash cash loooooool.

Ok lemme stop lemme stop nah just writing that I had to laugh, anywayssss but when secondary school days were coming to an end my life basically spiraled after that **I didn't even do my GCSEs only English and maths** but failed them so most of my life from there was in the hands of the roads. I found it thrilling but now that I am older I would body slam the old me like "yah dumb, you stupid, fool get yah life together mate". But I would also look at her and say, **"you also made me stronger but there is still some work to do"** but still you're a bitch so yeah".

I use to look forward to go to school to cause mischief lool, **getting kicked out of class, bickering with class mates,** bunking and giving two tosses about rules, typical movements of a 'reckless kid' but don't be fooled **I did still listen in class** and 'most' of the time get my work done it was just one of them ones where I think most young people felt like school weren't the thing. I had a mindset of fuck it like **what is this crap is it really going to benefit me in life?** Are you teaching me things I actually need to get taught? Fucking hell waking up in the morning to go

listen to some know it all teacher making me feel dumb if my work is not good as someone else or I learn things in a certain way and might need that extra help and when I do I usually don't get the exact help needed.

I think you know where this goes, weeee look at me riding the ROLLERCOASTER OF EMBARESSMENT AND FAILURE, might as well of been riding a fricking rollercoaster especially made for those people as most people saw me. As that which also made me feel the **unwanted titles that became a part of me.**

It's just weird feeling the emotions and thinking the way I think to a point I'm like I am really messed up and heartbroken innit. Well I did experience heart ache, being used, feeling unwanted and feeling everything I did or say was wrong that it became **so draining.** Cool imma go bury my head in some water so I can look into thin air and daydream of my past and deep how much of a not wanted, train wreck, mistake of a problem child I am... **we can carry this on tomorrow or suttin,** till we write again, bye bye.

Narrator: It becomes normal, thinking you are never going to get somewhere in life and being seen as a walking, talking dummy with not one touch or part of purity left inside of you. She... Silcari wounded and caged in a box of doubt and worthlessness, but let's see where else this Diary of Inner Thoughts is going to lead us.

Dear Diary,

So **here we are again,** I don't even know why I'm writing this like anyone is going to take time to read this or it's going to be beneficial in anyway kmt (Kiss My Teeth) but we are doing it so **let's just carry on and go with the flow** I guess. Let's go onto talking about where I ended up after all the ruthless behaviors and dumb decision making I have made in life.

So... I ended up somewhere you do not want to be as a young person and I actually rate myself for dealing with **CCTV** in my face every day and **staff all up in my business** and meeting people that are also into your business and just want to use you for your kindness and what you can give them.

Bound to happen being put into a house full of brain damaged, psychotic, heartbroken, ruthless, rude kids. it was rocky for me. Looking back at it now, it became normal to me, living in 'big brother' as I would call it. Imagine being put somewhere and you don't even know who lives there, eyes on you every day from before you leave and when you're back on the premises. **I would have police called most of the time for dumb shit** mostly for being 'missing' when I would literally be down the road or I would be on and off the premises after curfew.

Because obviously we was given a curfew to go back to the placement and if not they report you missing like you really love wasting the pigs time and do you really think I like to see their faces when I see them on a normal day as they are always

about patrolling 'protecting the community' protecting the community my ass.

If I had one wish I would wish to be in control, why? Well, I think this would be a main wish everyone I think wished they had. I feel this world is just messed up like for real I don't even want to think about it I do enough thinking as it is, don't you think?

The main problem I feel we deal with especially living in the United Kingdom aka BTEC United States is **housing**. We are expected to live in box size flats which if they are new build and furnished you are spending a lot of money if you're going private. Even that you are expected to have a guarantor and earning a certain amount and if you are on **Universal Credit** it's even worse because most don't except Universal Credit. So yeah, you are having to wait years to even get housed so you are expected to live with other people or become homeless which happened to me, I'm **sofa surfing** and my other option is living in a **hostel** with crackheads and thieves like what the fuck. If you think that's bad they put mothers in there with their kids, that's how much they care. And if you are a certain **race or ethnicity** then bwoi just know you are definitely getting nowhere unless you keep harassing them in a way. But even that your still stuck, it's not fair and even when you are a priority you are expected to go by what they put in place and not what is actually the right and best option for you.

But nah your **mental health** gets put under the rug and you are just seen as a vulnerable, stupid, attitude problem care leaver. No one actually cares it's just all a front as every day we change our mask and posture to life and the people within it on a regular basis.

And the thing is most of the time you don't even realise that you are doing it and so by this what can we actually believe is true and what **who can be trusted?** If we can't even put trust in ourselves and be real because we have to put on a front most of the time to not give off certain energy and showing emotions? Emotions we are expected to shut away because the advantage and vulnerability it holds.

But you know what we as individuals think in different ways and **some are stuck to a cycle they wish they could change but can't.** Therefore you start to make yourself think this is normal and whoever is within it is a person who chose to devote their life to. But is actually someone who has made **you feel trapped in a bubble you can't pop.**

Even maybe certain days might be a little different but still the same type of routine and emotions strapped to you, anyways **sorry I am someone that can speak for a while sometimes especially when I am deep in my thoughts** lol you know like that but it's true how people say watch the company you keep because it's the main cause to who you become.

Dear Diary,

Ok ok **lemme tell you what my routine is on a day to basissss,** so it's starting

with me checking my phone BUT not getting caught up in the socials as that is THE PORTAL OF HELL. Yeah fuck all that seeing these insta models and fake relationships like get outta here get a grip we know it's all lies like your triceps and titties bitch LMRAO (Laugh My Real Ass Off).

Nah like fr, anyways yeah **check my phone** and see if I got any phone calls or important messages, I have to say important cah u know you get some irrelevant message that are like byee I do not have time for you. And then I will get up and make my bed... Next will be the stress relief room aka **the bathroom** where I will freshen up and get ready to start the chain dragging days. Lastly I will check that I have got everything then I will be

No I don't eat, **my timings are weird**, another thing that's frustrating and don't make sense. Even **stepping out my house** be a damn problem, just want to punch everyone in their face. When you get in my way I just imagine my hand back slapping people's head like move out my way why you there for. Even being **on the bus** and you're in a rush and out of all times it wants to be stopping at every bus stop, this is why we need some rocket back packs and flying cars, get to where I need to go quick time like shhmm skrr I'm here bitchessss.

If you are wondering what I do such as **education and a job**, well.... I do different type of things education and job based but my main job is a **Youth Leader** where I engage in voluntary work involving **support for young people** ages 16-30 to get into education and work. And help them get to work within our company to make steps to what they are interested in and what activities and skills needed to do so.

I also engage in **making a difference to the criminal justice system** as I was involved in it and ended up in care at the age 16 which is where adulthood kicked in for me. I also feel for other individuals... The system has not treated them right and things could be put in place to better the system and the approach and energy the police give off.

I have also got involved into a **leadership program** which will help me build my leadership skills and other skills such as confidence and self-courage which I lack a lot of because of tight gripping insecurities and feeling unworthy. Not reaching certain goals I wanted to reach during school times wasn't accomplished but I'm making it happen now and I just need to keep going with the flow and know I will get to where I want to get in life and to stay positive and I am worth it.

To **start loving myself more** and not putting so much **pressure** on myself you know because I am actually trying to change but there will be obstacles as negative energy follows you everywhere so yeah.

And finally I do **dancing** and **singing** which I am also progressing on and trying to stay positive on. You're probably wondering how I found Ways to do so well... how I found to **stay positive** is repeating short encouragement quotes to boost my esteem in my head such as **"I will do right"** **"Stay positive"** **"You are going to get far in life"** **"Start believing in yourself and don't let the little things strike you down"** even

though at times I felt like it weren't working but now I've said them words so many times it is embedded in my head.

Narrator: It can be very hard to speak about how you feel at times and how much you care for the people in your life even though they have caused you pain, and the older you get you deep things more in life, especially for this person and Silcari... they are a close person to her and someone she always looked up to but also someone the older she got she started falling out with and weren't as close to as they were when they were younger. But one thing they always knew between each is the bond will always be there no matter how hard at times it can be to show that.

I'm not going to go into detail about this **situation** because I just don't want to and certain things just don't need to be disclosed but I guess certain things happen for a reason. But at least they are doing positive things during this time and want to make a difference with themselves when they come out.

I didn't even know how to act **when I first got told....** Do I run? Do I find them? Do I cry? It was just too much to handle at that point, to nearly be **losing someone close to you**, dealing with your mental health that makes you feel on edge as it is and wanting to kill yourself. Feeling helpless and both bad and good memories of that person playing in your head, and you think at that point can anything else get worse? I was literally going to section myself because things got too much and even writing this it makes me feel like **crying** because people will be like jheez this girl really has problems.

And it's quite embarrassing because people start to look at you differently when knowing something like that and just knowing yourself. And you bring yourself down more because it's like **I really do have problems**, no one likes me, I should just lock myself away. Do you get why I don't want to be here?

The **person I was close with** from knee high is on the verge of getting pinned for something they did not do for someone that was supposed to be their friend, supposed to look out for and not drag into something you should of dealt with as an adult and not **getting someone else caught up** in it and now having to deal with the consequences of being used by the roads and your so called friends.

How it is to be used like a bath not washed after months of body dirt left to leave its tracks non noticeable. And then when the pieces are being gathered **my blood, my right hand being charged for something they did not do**, being somewhere at the wrong place and wrong time. But I guess as they say be careful of the energy you keep and the people you call your family and so-called friends because they will be the ones that will leave you high and dry and knock you down when they start to see you gain your strength and change your ways for the better.

It does hurt feeling the way that I feel, feeling I have let everyone down, seeing my mum cry and how I leave her with my broken heart needing to be mended... but hard when **both hearts are broken.**

It's hard to fight the emotions you feel when seeing someone in pain and you're one reason for it too but then it makes you think at times why should I even shed a tear for you, why should I feel a way when you have also caused me pain. You can say to yourself you don't need no one but you would also be lying to yourself. **We all need someone in life,** sometimes that extra person or people make you stronger but that don't mean you always need people. You just sometime need some presence when the nights get lonely, and the days be dragging. But hey **I'm getting through it** and know **you will get there** no matter how much the most of you says to give up, DON'T, be you and **embrace the inner you and how special you are** in your own way cause I am and really don't care if you can't deal with it we weren't put on earth to please everyone so yeah this is me **till next time peace out.**

THE SGT

BY
JOHN. C.C.

YOUR PROJECT

The efficiency of the Defender owes to its extraordinary movement, embodying the most logical advances in... With tactical advantages Defender... smartly in appearance... is for men... 3 women

DEFENDER

SDW

LEADERS
UNLOCKED

THE SGT

The SGT who was always ready for action, had their equipment attached to their chest and rappelled down the rope being the last of their squad still inside the helicopter. Releasing the rope from its latches, **The SGT moves away from the rope with their squad behind him slowly picking up the pace on the green field,** camouflaged by the dark abyss of the sky and everyone's black uniforms. The only slightly bright thing on their uniforms being a patch with the company crest and their motto "who dares wins".

Moving forward on the field, all the squad was expecting the unexpected, **especially The SGT who went into danger with their mask on their face and squad by their side.** Now in a slight jog, the squad keeps a steady pace. Without warning, as if a hundred catastrophes went off at once The SGT's squad had only one way of escaping which was a small gap in the trees, on the other side of the field.

With only a short amount of time and a short line of men with high powered rifles on their backs, **The SGT with their men must run out of the open wasteland** now full of holes from what felt like a hundred explosions. In one of the fastest runs that ordinary people could only dream of, The SGT runs with what now is only a handful of their squad. The SGT keeps running praying that the men make it out with them in one piece.

Unexpectedly, The SGT slows down now trying to use all their strength to grasp what little air they can, trying to lower their heart rate (which was going faster than a race car), trying to ignore the slight **pain in their lungs** from not having enough air, trying to ignore the **pain of the muscles in their legs** for not having enough oxygen, **trying to save their life** in more than one way.

The SGT had to slow down, there was nothing they could do unless they wanted to die and I'm **not talking about the bullets.** The SGT was now far behind their squad, with bullets flying past them, they hoped that they would continue going past them or stop altogether. **Coming to terms with their defeat** after one of their best efforts, The SGT comes to a **full stop.** Finally, with their hands dropping their rifle a bullet pierces their heart with a great thud and they fall.

A second is all it takes to change everything.

Opening their eyes, The SGT realises they're not dead but can hear only a voice saying, **"come on slow coach".** A sound of a bullet goes again, and it goes clean through their leg but once again nothing happens but a voice screaming "pick up the pace fatty". With a confused tone The SGT thinks to themselves asking **"why am I here?".** The SGT closes their eyes and it's pitch black, they open them and it's the darkest blue sky with a dark green field. static fills the air and static builds up in The SGT's eyes.

Closing their eyes again, The SGT opens their eyes to a light blue sky with a gleaming sun. Looking down, fresh cut grass that is the lightest of greens cover the ground and feet with a jogging pace are treading on the grass. Looking forward, they see the people they normally hang around in the far distance, screaming at them telling them to “speed up” and “pick up the pace fatty”. **Now they understand.**

Trying to catch up, **they realise; they aren't a SGT, that is only something they dream of doing.** Using their imagination to escape the reality of their constant boring reality of fire drills and training on the field. Trying to give their life excitement compared to the usual in and out. However. It was hard for them to escape their situation with the constant insults and the health problems they're currently having. They finally stopped at the finish. Everyone had already packed up and left without them.

Now with no one from their squad or anyone around, they look across the barren wasteland that is the field, take a sip of water and start to jog.

By themselves they had had all the time in the world to exercise but being on their own wasn't right for them. They had asked their friends who said no, which they understood. They asked acquaintances and some said yes.

After a long time of **team-building and exercise,** The SGT felt happy with what they all were doing so **kept going** with their squad.

Eventually, **The SGT returned to the training session** they had found so hard and finished first of their friends and squad. Their boss and their squad were all **super proud** of them and they were proud of their squad and everyone. They were all now ready for anything.

The SGT remembers their defeats and The SGT remembers their victories. they learnt if you have that little bit of **ambition,** that little bit of **courage** and that little **idea** of something you want, you will be able to do anything to get it.

A second is all you need to change everything.