“You know how birds fly in those V formations?” Jo asked as she tucked her hands behind her head and looked up, counting the clouds. The sun reached mildly down from the sky, slowly warming the bench she was lying on, but a breeze rolled off the lake making her shiver. She crossed her ankles, trying to protect them from the wind which hadn’t quite figured out that it was technically spring now.

“Sure. What about it?” Casey asked from his spot on the ground. He had conceded the bench to her without even being asked. She’d trained him well.

Jo closed her eyes and imagined a flock of birds moving across the sky in perfect synchronization. “Do you think they all know where they’re going?”

“Like always, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Casey sighed, picking at the yellowing grass and stacking it into piles next to his hips. His two-sizes-too-big short-sleeve shirt billowed around his thin torso, but he didn’t seem to mind the cold.
“I mean, they’re just blindly following the bird in front of them, aren’t they? That’s the point? Do you think they all know like ‘hey, we’re heading to south Florida’ or do you think they just trust the guy in front?”

Casey lolled his head in her direction, his unnecessary Ray-Ban’s shading his eyes. “I have no idea. Why don’t you tell me what you think?”

“I don’t think they know,” Jo said, looking down at him. Her braid fell off the edge of the bench and he tugged on it lightly. “What do you think it’s like to be a bird?”

They were both silent for a second and then Casey said, “Hey Jo, can I ask you something?”

“Sure thing, slugger.”

“Why do you think I care?”

She sat up in a rush of energy. “Because you should care! They’re not bound by anything. They can go anywhere they want. That would be the best kind of freedom.”

Casey sat up, pushing his sunglasses back into his wild hair. “I really doubt birds think about it that much.”

“But you don’t know.” Jo laid back down and looked at the sky.

Casey slowly lowered himself back down, too. “I guess I don’t.”

They were silent for a long time, each thinking their own thoughts respectively. Casey didn’t mind playing hooky, especially not now that they were seniors, but it did cross his mind every once in a while that they were supposed to be in school. Jo, on the other hand, hadn’t thought about school since she’d decided she wasn’t going. What else did she need besides the open air and a pair of ears to listen to her contemplations?

“I hope they don’t have Pteronophobia,” Jo said, to test whether Casey had fallen asleep or not.

“Who?” he mumbled.

“The birds.”

“You hope they don’t have what? …A fear of flying?”

“No, a fear of feathers. Fear of flying is Pteromerhanophobia, but that would suck too.”

Casey considered what she said and then nodded. “Yeah,
that would suck.”

…..

“Jo! Get up!”

A voice reached Jo’s ears through the fog of sleep. She burrowed deeper beneath her comforter and pretended she hadn’t heard him. Having only made it to bed three hours previous to her wakeup call, she wasn’t feeling very inclined to resurface into society. After a few moments of blissful silence she found herself drifting off again.

“Jordan!” her brother Miles yelled, his feet making heavy footsteps as he entered her bedroom doorway. “I hate it when you make me play mom. Get up.”

“I can’t!” Jo yelled, her voice muffled beneath the blankets. “I have Heliophobia.”

“You used that one last week.”

“Fine, I have Chromatophobia.”

“Whatever it is, I’m sure you don’t have it,” he said, clearly getting impatient.

“It’s the fear of colors! And yes I do! I can’t come out. I must live in total darkness!”

“Jo,” he said, and then he ripped the covers off the bed.

“I hate you.” Jo glared at him, feeling the cold morning air sink into her bones. Once the cozy bed bubble was popped there was no hope for falling back asleep.

“Tough. We’re leaving in five.”

“Wait!” Jo swallowed. “Mom’s not taking me?”

“That would have required her coming home last night,” Miles said as he walked out the door.

Jo shouldn’t have been surprised, but for some reason she always was. It wasn’t as if their mother ever did anything traditional like buy food or pay the bills, so why come home? Sighing heavily, Jo slid off her bed and picked up the first piece of clothing she touched. Shirts and pants were easy since they covered her floor like water covered the Earth; it was socks that were the hard part. Eventually she found one in the Pacific Ocean and one in the Mediterranean Sea—both dirty—and by then her time was up and Miles was yelling down the hallway. She slipped into her boots, grabbed her mostly empty backpack, and
ran out of the room. That last thing was more for appearances than anything else.

In the kitchen, Miles straightened his tie and held out a twenty. “For lunch.”

“I don’t want your money.”

He rolled his eyes. “I took it from Mom’s whiskey bottle.”

The one she thought they didn’t know about. The one she only sometimes remembered to put back into the corner of her closet. Didn’t matter, it was usually empty anyway.

“Fine.” Jo snatched the bill and shouldered past him out the door.

Miles’ car was a piece of shit, but at least it ran. Still, Jo was late to school and Miles was late to work. Even though the bell had already rung, Jo shuffled her feet outside her first period classroom.

“Jordan,” Mr. Dienes said, noticing her as he reached to close the door. “What are you doing out here?”

“Oh I can’t go in there.”

“Why not?”

“I have Ephebiphobia.”

His fingers tapped rapidly against the door knob. “Which is what?”

“The fear of teenagers. So I really can’t go in there.”

“Jordan, you are a teenager.”

“You see my dilemma then.”

Mr. Dienes gripped the doorknob tighter and flicked his head toward the room. “Let’s go.” Jo scurried inside as he cast his voice over the room, “Quiet down everyone!” and shut the door behind them, clapping his hands together to get everyone’s attention. To her right, the classroom door opened again and a hesitant head poked in.

“Come.” Mr. Dienes snapped his fingers. “Come in.”

“Sorry,” the kid said, pulling a wrinkled piece of paper out of the massive stack of books he was carrying.

Mr. Dienes glanced at it quickly and tossed it aside. “Yes that’s fine. Take a seat.” He wasn’t the type of teacher to introduce a new student to the class, which was fine with Jo. However, she wasn’t fine with the way the new kid made a
beeline right for her. She didn’t think about the fact that there weren’t that many open seats or that his books were probably pretty heavy and her row was closest. She just tried to conjure up a good excuse as fast as possible for why the empty seats on either side of her were off limits.

“You can’t sit there,” she said. And when he just stared at her, “Um, I have Dextrophobia.”

The new kid stood there with his books halfway out of his arms and his mouth just a little bit open. “What?”

“It’s the fear of objects to the right side of my body,” she motioned to the seat he was standing over. “So you can’t sit there.”

“Um, okay,” he said, stepping around her to the seat on the other side.

“You can’t sit there either,” Jo blurted, making a few annoyed heads snap in her direction. “I also have Levophobia.”

The new kid looked sideways at Jo, mouth open again. “Let me guess—”

“You can sit back there.” She pointed to the empty seat two rows behind her.

She felt a little bad about the puppy-dog likeness in his eyes, but more than anything she was relieved he went anyway. After successfully securing her space, Jo flipped open the solitary notebook she carried around and began to sketch a dragon she knew was going to be epic. It had been forming itself in her mind for days and was finally ready to come to life. It quickly grew a body and a head as class progressed. The flames were just curling out of its mouth when Mr. Dienes said, “Jordan, I’d like you to do number two for us.”

She looked up. “You mean read my answer out loud?”

“Yes, that’s what I mean.”

“Oh, I can’t do that.” Jo pinched herself in the thigh to keep from shrinking beneath the judgmental gazes of her classmates.

“Jordan.” Mr. Dienes didn’t hide his clenched jaw muscles. “I’m sure you can.”

“Oh no, you see, I can’t because I have Graphophobia which is the fear of writing so I couldn’t write down the
answers to any of the questions on the worksheet. I did it, I swear I did it, but that’s a lot to keep in your brain and I can’t quite remember what my answer was for number two since I couldn’t write it down.”

There was a moment of silence where Mr. Dienes was either trying not to yell at her or deciding how he was going to murder her later in secret. “Please see me after class,” he said and then called on another student.

By the end of the hour Jo’s wings almost looked real. They were massive and scaly and epic just as she’d thought they would be. She shove her notebook into her backpack and walked up to the front. “What’s up?”

“What’s up,” he said, scribbling on a post-it note, “is that I’m concerned about you, Jordan. A few of your other teachers have voiced similar worries about your poor attendance and homework grades.” He ripped the post-it off the pad and handed it to her. “I’m sending you to see Principal Harris so maybe the two of you can talk about it.”

Jo hated the way he looked at her like she needed help. “With all due respect, Mr. D, I’d rather not see the principal. If he’s just going to tell me again how poorly I’m doing, I already know that. So can I save us both some time?”

“I’m sorry you feel that way, but I’m, unfortunately, not giving you a choice. You can head down to his office. He’ll be expecting you shortly.” With that Mr. Dienes sat down and dismissed her.

Jo pinched her thigh so her head wouldn’t hang and her feet wouldn’t drag as she made her way down the hallway. On either side of her, classroom doors slammed shut and she wished, for the first time ever, to be on the other side of one of those doors. The secretary smiled disgustedly wide as Jo entered the waiting area. “You can just go right on in, Sweetie.” Jo wanted to pinch her instead.

Principal Harris’s smile was more appropriately sized as she closed the door behind her and took a seat in the plush armchairs across from his desk. It didn’t really make sense to waste all this money on comfortable chairs when no one that had a reason to sit in them could ever be comfortable.
“Jordan,” Mr. Harris smiled, a little bit sad this time. “I hear you’ve been having some trouble.”
She shrugged. “If that’s what they say.”
He raised an eyebrow. “You don’t think so?”
She shrugged again. “I don’t know.”
“Well.” He clasped his hands together and rested them on his expensive wood desk. “I’ll just tell you what I’ve been seeing and hearing and then we can go from there.” He paused to let her reply but she just picked at the fraying strings on her backpack. “A few of your teachers have voiced to me that you’re frequently absent and that when you are in class you’re not really present. They’ve said you rarely turn in your homework and overall don’t seem to put any thought or effort into school.”
When he put it that way it sounded worse than it really was. Principal Harris ducked his head, trying to make eye contact with Jo as she desperately fought his efforts. “Yeah, I mean that’s true.”
“Would you like to say anything on your behalf?”
“If you’re going to suspend me or expel me or whatever, just do it.”
“You’re a smart girl, Jordan. Other than this year and last year you have good marks throughout your schooling career. It’s clear that the problem isn’t with the work.”
“What are you saying?” Jo didn’t like the way this was going, the way he was scrutinizing her. She pinched her arm to keep from snapping at him.
“Are you having problems at home, Jordan? You know we’ve got lots of people here who can help you. You don’t have to talk about anything that makes you uncomfortable.”
In that moment Jo hated Principal Harris. How dare he think that she was “troubled.” How dare he assume that she couldn’t just be a bad student because she was lazy. “I’m not having problems at home.”
“You don’t have to deny-”
“I’m not having any problems at home, okay?”
He rubbed his thumbs over the backs of his hands and nodded thoughtfully. “Okay. May I ask you, then, why you miss so much school?”
Jo took a deep breath. “I don’t know if you’ve heard, but I have Dromophobia which is the fear of crossing streets. So when my brother can’t drive me to school because he has work, I can’t walk ‘cause I won’t be able to cross the street to get here. So I have to stay at home. So that’s why I miss so much school.”

Principal Harris kept nodding. “Okay. Then why not do your homework at home and hand it in on the days you are here?” Little beads of sweat were budding on his forehead, probably from all the patience he was exercising.

“I’m really glad you asked,” Jo chattered animatedly. “It’s unfortunate, really, that I also have Numerophobia which keeps me from doing my math homework and Logophobia—the fear of words—which means I can’t do the homework for the rest of my classes either.”

“Why doesn’t your fear of words affect your ability to speak?”

It was kind of a smart ass thing for a principal to say (even if he made it sound nice) so it was a good thing that when it came to phobias Jo was always prepared. “No, that’s actually a really good question. Thank you for asking. For many of my childhood years I couldn’t utter a single word. Then, one day, I decided I wanted to go to therapy and after years of hard work I’ve managed to overcome some aspects of my phobia. They’re making a documentary about my journey and I now give inspirational speeches to kids in Canada.”

Principal Harris gave her his best disappointed-adult look and said, “Jordan…”

“Well what did you expect, Mr. H. I’m not troubled, I’m just a kid who hates school and doesn’t do her work. Nothing special to see here, let’s move it along.”

“I really don’t think that’s true.”

“Well I’m sorry you’ve made me out to be something I’m not. Can I go? I’m late for a class I never go to.”

He paused for a moment, considering whether or not to let her get away with it. “All right, get to class then.”

He wrote an excused absence pass and Jo stalked out of the office as fast as she could. The idea of ditching the rest of the day only crossed her mind once as she made her way to
second period. She would have done it too if Casey wasn’t in her next class. She needed a pair of best friend ears to listen to her principal woes and then she could skip after that. Handing the note to her teacher, Jo took her usual seat between Casey and the window.

“Hey,” Casey whispered. “Where were you?”

“You’re not even going to believe this,” Jo said, as the teacher blabbed on about something or other in the front of the classroom. “D-Man sent me to the Principal’s office because he and the other teachers are ‘concerned’ for me.”

Casey copied down the notes from the chalkboard into his notebook. “So what’d Harris say?”

“He asked if the reason I don’t do school is because I have problems at home,” Jo snorted. She was surprised when Casey didn’t laugh. He flicked his eyes from the board back to his notebook as he continued writing. Jo smacked his arm. “Did you not hear me?”

Casey put his pen down and looked at her. “I mean, you do, don’t you?”

Jo looked like the new kid from first period with her mouth hanging open like that. “What are you talking about? Are you taking their side?”

“Jo,” Casey started. “Your mom’s an alcoholic.” He and Mr. D and Principal Harris must have practiced that pity look together. “You have to drive around and look for her. I’d say she’s a pretty big problem.”

For a long moment they just stared at each other and Jo forgot to pinch herself to keep from being hurt.

“Jordan?” Her teacher called to get her attention. “Since you don’t have a partner, Annie is going to work with you today.”

A timid girl across the aisle smiled at Jo with a mouth full of braces and gathered her books in her arms. She strode over and sat down in Casey’s seat. “Hi.”

Jo didn’t reply as she turned away from Annie. She pulled out her notebook and flipped it to the next blank page, sketching the outline of a butterfly.