



This Time of Darkness

By H. M. Hoover

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Editorial Review

Review

"With detail and suspense the author tells an exciting futuristic survival story which comments on power and class-ridden social structures." -*Horn Book*

"The author's careful attention to detail and her astute sense of timing make this a highly believable, highly readable story that, while frighteningly powerful, ends on a comforting note." -*Booklist*

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1

It was day 157, and it was raining. Or at least Amy hoped it was. She could hear liquid running down the outside of the opaque wall. Of course a pipe could have broken up-level. They often did. The city was old.

"What are you staring at?" whispered Anita, who sat next to her.

"It's raining."

"So?"

Amy shrugged, intimidated by the older girl's lack of interest. "I'd like to see rain sometime...just to see what it's like."

"Who cares?" said Anita, who had no idea what rain was.

"Me."

"That figures."

Triggered by their whispers, the nearest swung around and aimed in their direction. Its red light blinked a warning. The watcher had seen them talking.

"You will have two hours to complete this test," the computer whispered through its thousand tiny speakers.

"Begin at the bell tone." The computer asked a question requiring a one-word answer. The student said the word and pressed the button for the next question. When the final question was answered, the student could either signal for review and hear the questions again, or shut the terminal off, thus recording the score.

Technology had eliminated the desire.

Amy finished the test in twelve minutes. She made four deliberate errors. She did not signal completion but waited, head bent as if still working. She had learned it did not pay to attract attention.

The learning center in which she sat was the size of a football field, grimy yellow, low-ceilinged, windowless, and dimly lit. Around her sat a thousand students, ranging in age from ten to sixteen, each with an "A" name, each at a terminal unit precisely thirty-one inches from the next. The room smelled of unwashed bodies, stale food, and musty walls. Next door was learning center B, and next to that was C, and so on down the line, all the same.

Bored with hearing the same questions over again, Amy sat up and cautiously glanced around. She could see Anita's throat working as the girl struggled to verbalize thought. In front of Anita sat Axel, curled in his seat, hugging himself and rocking, his eyes glazed. If he could hear the computer's voice in his speaker he gave no sign of it; he never spoke; his hands never touched his terminal board.

Amy saw nothing wrong with his behavior. A lot of kids were like him. Sometimes she wished she could be like them, or like anyone but herself. At least they fit in. Anita found learning difficult. School absorbed her completely, instead of boring her as it did Amy. Axel could shut everything out from the moment he entered the learning center. Only the dismissal bell seemed to release him.

Amy was always aware of the boredom, of being shut in with the constant murmur of the instructor's voice in a thousand speakers, of the whispers and restless shifting of the students, and of the watcher's cameras. Sometimes she wondered what was wrong with her; no one else seemed to find fault with their life. Or if they did, they kept quiet about it. As she did. Maybe there were a lot of people like her, and she just never knew them. And maybe there weren't.

Propping her head on her left hand, she stared unseeingly at her screen while she passed the time daydreaming. Her favorite daydream was "going outside." She would imagine what it was like outside the city--a place with no walls and no ceilings, no hallways or ramps--maybe even no people--or less-- Halfway down the room she saw a boy get up and leave. A girl followed, then another boy. She waited for five more students to leave before shutting off her own terminal. Anita hissed, "Show-off," at her as she left. Axel stopped rocking and sat up.

In the control room the watcher frowned. By chance he had been watching Amy when she first looked up from her screen. Experience as well as instinct told him she had finished the test--which indicated too-quick comprehension.

He asked the computer for her life file: Age eleven, born on level nine, mother food prep tech, father unknown. No physical or mental dysfunctions. No record deviations. The only mark against the child was literacy. No record of who had taught her to read and write. Literacy was not an official crime, but it was an affectation of superiority which the government tried to discourage among the lower levels, since it often led to unacceptable behavior. He noted that corrective programming had brought her down to mid-normal and kept her there. Or had she kept herself there? That was a possibility; the too-bright could mimic normalcy. The watcher weighted fact against instinct. Instinct won. He coded her file as that of potential troublemaker and returned to scanning in time to see Axel, the transfer from twelve, give his terminal a savage kick before running from the room. The exit camera saw Axel pause in the hall, looking for someone. In that unguarded moment the boy's expression changed from apathy to hope.

Perhaps the child was not going psycho but pretending? The watcher hesitated. In a job like this, one had to guard against paranoia. When these brats grew up and caused problems, the top levels could always say, "Why wasn't this spotted years ago?" and then his neck would be on the line. God, how he hated kids! Axel caught up with Amy at the corner. An emergency car was coming, sirens screaming, the sound trapped and echoing against the low ceiling. Amy had stopped to put on her earguards. He touched her arm and, when she turned, smiled his sweet, sad smile. Then, as the noise got painfully loud, his eyes left hers and he seemed to retreat into himself. His lips began to move.

Thinking he was talking to her, she slid back an earguard and leaned closer; in the voice of a small child, he was singing a lullaby. "Rufus the Rabbit is going to sleep. Down in his burrow where silence is deep." It was close and hot in the hall, but Amy shivered. She put her hands over his ears as tightly as she could and held them there until the siren was far down the hall.

It was hard to stand that way. The crowd was thick, and people jostled past the stationary little island formed by the pair. Some people bumped accidentally; others deliberately hit one child or the other and quickly disappeared in the crowd. Amy took blows for granted. She had been taught that people expressed their hostility or their need to touch in the hallways. It did not pay to stand still.

"Come on," she said, releasing him. "Let's go home." He didn't answer, but he had stopped singing, and his eyes focused again. She started across the corridor, and he followed.

"Why didn't you take the test?"

"Why should I?" he said. "That don't care what you know--so long as you don't cause problems."

Amy thought that over and decided there was some truth to it. Still, "If you don't answer some questions, even wrong, they notice you. And then you get special programming."

A nearby litter vac turned on just then, and the roar drowned her out. Loose garbage flew toward the suction screen, and Amy squinted against the dust. Axel's face went blank with the noise, and the corners of his mouth twitched.

"Why don't you wear your earguards?" she yelled over the roar.

"I don't have any."

She stared at him. "Why not?"

Two men brushed between them and nearly knocked them down. Neither pair looked at the other.

I don't know how to get them."

He was a little abnormal, she decided. Everyone knew how to get necessities. "You take your ID card to the depot, stand in line, put your card in the slot, tell the machine you want ear guards, and the ear guards come down the chute."

Axel looked at her for a moment and then at the pavement. The floor was cracked and rough here; litter had collected in the cracks, and he stepped over them with exaggerated care. But he didn't say anything.

The heavy scent of a fry shop filled the corridor, and Amy was distracted by her stomach's growl. She didn't really like deep-fried vegetable peelings, but they were hot and salty. Sometimes they were even crisp. And when she was hungry, she wished she could afford them. But it didn't pay to think about what you couldn't have.

"Do you have an ID card?"

Axel nodded. He looked scared.

He stopped walking and leaned against the wall. Amy hesitated before turning back to join him. "What's wrong?"

He didn't answer. After a few seconds she was tired of being jostled while she stood still.

"You're going to get your back all greasy from that filthy wall," she warned him. "Also roaches on you."

He jumped as if he had received an electric shock, turned and stared at the wall. It was sticky with years of grime. At least a dozen roaches clung there, antennae quivering as they fed. More were on the pavement.

"How do you live this way?" his voice was almost a whisper, and she had to ask him to repeat the question.

"How can people stand it?" He looked as if he were going to be sick. "The noise and crowds and dirt--it's all dark and dirty!"

"It's like that everywhere," Amy said, puzzled, "everywhere I've ever been. Is it different on level twelve wasn't that far up--maybe she could go visit him.

"It's just as bad. Worse where I sleep."

Hope flickered out. "so why did you ask?"

"Because it's--" He cast a worried glance at the wall. "Can we talk while we walk?"

"Do you want to go get ear guards or not?"

"Yes. If you come with me."

"You *do* have your ID?"

"Yes."

"Come on then. The nearest depot's down this block."

The supply depot was crowded with long lines at every chute. Axel no more than stepped inside than he wanted out.

"We'll be here a long time," he said, edging toward the door. She grabbed him by the arm and saw his eyes were beginning to go blank. He was about to shut everything out. Her first impulse was to leave him there; then she remembered him singing when the siren went by.

She took his hand and held it. "I hate crowds, too," she said. "But we can stand it for as long as it takes."

"I'm O.K." he pulled free, then looked at her. "No, I'm not," he admitted and took her hand again. "Talk to me. It's easier if I don't have to think about where I am."

Amy didn't understand that remark but did as he asked. She whispered her suspicions that it was raining outside. When he nodded agreement--instead of sneering as Anita had--she found herself liking him in spite of his oddness.

The two of them stood there talking in their city-issue clothing--shapeless shirts and pants of dark brown.

The color did not show the dirt. The dark cloth made their faces pale and their eyes look much too large.

Their hair was cut to regulation standards, a bowl cut with bangs that accented amy's round face, while Axel's fine nose and chin were reduced to fox-like sharpness. Their shoes were thong sandals, thick-soled

and clumsy, and their bare feet were filthy. They looked no worse than anyone else.

"It's nice when it rains," Axel said, his voice wistful. "I didn't used to think so, but I do now. It's not like the irrigation mist. Rain comes in drops. All different size and speeds. Sometimes, when the wind blows, it rains so hard the roof sings--"

"You got some line of garbage, kid." A man in line in front

of Axel had turned around and was looking down at the boy. The man's voice was heavy with contempt.

"You never seen rain. You never been outside. You never gonna get outside. So can the crap."

"Maybe he comes from level eighty and he's slumming?" A woman joined in. "Maybe he's a midget CS-fifty in disguise?"

Both adults laughed.

Axel blushed and his chin touched his chest.

"No one can go outside," another man told the boy, not with hostility, but in an effort to correct wrong thinking. "You're old enough to know that. Besides, there's nothing to do out there. There's no reason to go there."

Axel risked a glance at the man and quickly looked away but said nothing. Amy didn't blame him for not defending himself. It didn't pay to provoke strange adults. Some of them hit you, and there were never any guards around when you needed them. Like Axel she kept her head down and her mouth shut until the adults grew bored with staring at them.

The line moved forward slowly. She passed the time wondering if Axel did know what he was talking about. He sounded as if he did. She could hardly wait to get out of the depot to question him. Because sometime she was going to go outside, she decided. She was going to see for herself.

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