

Just the Secretary

The shapes on the screen mesh together. Our assignment is to facilitate our eye travelling in a circle without it ever coming to a natural rest. My eyes blur, my head spins, but not because my design is doing its job. I've been sitting looking at the screen for several hours. Danielle calls my name from a plush, spinny chair a row ahead and four massive computers to right. I grudgingly tear my eyes from assignment number five and rotate to acknowledge her call. "What do you think of the way Brother Johnson runs class?" Without pausing for my answer, Danielle proceeds to repeat our professor's words from two classes ago almost verbatim: "It is essential to comment and contribute to class discussions," she quotes. Then she adds, "A couple years ago, two or three people didn't contribute their thoughts in class and didn't help others out, which resulted in them not making it into the program."

The panic and dread set in.

There was one boy and five other girls in the classroom with the hard metal chairs, the bolted down windows – due to the fact that the boys used to jump out the windows to be funny in primary – and the black board covered in chalk dust and the vague markings of what looked to be a drawing of the Plan of Salvation. The girls sat in the corner with their chairs slightly curved – just enough to exclude me out of the circle of "Kool Kats." Each one of them had been my friend before being accepted into the exclusive group. Once they reached that acclaimed status in the Santa Clara fifteenth ward MiaMaids, they suddenly joined the royal court of the king of the hill, and I, the little ant, could only hope to get a quarter of the way up the steep, sloping hill before sliding down even further than before.

My Sunday school teacher glances exasperatedly at the group chattering like insects in the corner, giggling at some idiotic joke one of the girls said, but fails to ask them to settle down.

He asks the question again. The posse glances up and stares dumbfounded at the simple question. I raise my hand and give more than the typical Sunday school answer. Another burst of laughter from the ant hill. I look down and smooth out the wrinkles of my slightly faded hand-me-down skirt while the teacher continues. This time Rebecca answers the question, “We can...umm, like, pray?” The four-girl-swarm stares wide-eyed as Rebecca as gives her *stunning* primary, no, sunbeam answer. I glance up at the clock: 10:23, less than forty minutes to go. Class continues in this pattern. For every seven scriptures I look up and every four or five questions I answer, Rebecca answers one, with the girls looking bug-eyed, as if she has an all perfect knowledge. Class is finally dismissed, and the “Kool Kats” lead the way out of the small dark room with one of the girls singing her platinum ranking Billboard 100 song, “H.O.B.O. Hobo, living in Provo.” Another girl declares, “Wow, Syd! You are, like, the only one that EVER answers questions in class. You are SO smart!” I trail behind, gasping for air from beneath the blanket of loneliness.

“Welcome to class. I am Brother Johnson, and in the next eight weeks we will cover 2D and 3D design.”

Things seemed to sound OK. “I can do this. I CAN do this. I made it here,” I chant to myself.

“Participation in discussions plays a key role in this class and is fundamental to getting into the program when you apply in sixteen weeks. Now, to get started, what does this photo depict?”

The image shown on the projector is beautiful and interesting. There is a girl in a floating sea of clouds, light, and happiness, but she is reaching though the atmosphere into the expanse brimming and glowing with stars. My fingers itch to rise up, but my mind had shut down; my arms were uselessly glued to my thighs.

The same conversation happens every Wednesday at exactly six fifty-two. It is more than a mere not-wanting to go – I dread it. According to my mom, I will receive blessings for going, and if nothing else Sister Feller needs me there. That is why I threw my straw blonde hair into a ponytail, slipped on my tennis shoes, and trudged down the still-simmering blacktop to the church building that is four blocks, a short ally, and a parking lot away. I now stand in the church kitchen. Despite the one-hundred seven degree weather, the kitchen at the church is cold in the way that dry ice is cold. Burning. I stand at the sink washing the pots and pans that we had used to make an assortment of chocolate chip cookies, sugar cookies, and brownies in. The Kool Kats skirt around the cleanup job by loudly banging on the upright piano two rooms away, stealing the treats of the ward in the relief society room and running through the halls to visit friends in the cultural hall. I was done with the dishes, and tired of making small talk with my two leaders when the troops came marching in, ready for their treats. I still stand in the kitchen while the other girls lean against the opposite side of the counter in the adjoining room. The counter acts not only a physical barrier, but a symbol of the depth of our friendship and the level I am welcome in their group.

The plate of gooey, misshaped brownies sits in front of me. I reach for one in order to have something to do with my hands and my mouth that isn't a part of the conversation about the latest boy the oldest girl of the group had kissed and whether he was hot or not. The discussion hits a drag. Sister Miller hops her 5'2 body in to change the conversation to MiaMaids-related issues. "Girls? Girls! Let's talk about the Beehives that will be coming into MiaMaids in the next few months and what we can do to help them feel included." Several eyes roll, but the conversation moves to Cassie, a troublesome Beehive, and how we can help invite her to activities and keep her on the right path. As a friend of the younger girl I voice my opinion on

how help her. The first counselor, Lauren, looked me straight in the eyes and offhandedly responds, “It doesn’t matter what you think, Belen. You’re just the secretary.”

Our class of nineteen stands like cattle staring at the designs displayed on the whiteboard. We had gone through each one, tearing them apart with an occasional comment that reached six out of ten niceness on the compliment scale. “Anyone else have anything to say?” *Pause*. “You guys are too quiet,” he grumbles. An even longer pause hangs in the air. Suddenly my hand is up.

I take a deep breath before beginning. “I notice how everything falls in the Golden Ratio, whether the entire entity or little pieces. For example, in my black widow design, the main body, the legs, and the red marking are individually proportioned according to the Golden Ratio.” I finish. My heart is screaming: thump, thump, thump.

Cassie and I sit on the almost plush carpet in my room with “Mall World” set up in between us. “Green, you win!” the robotic voice chimes before I switch the button from on to off. I methodically put the pieces to the game away, stacking the money in the correct order and double checking to make sure the zip lock bags are tightly done up. Cassie starts to talk. “If it weren’t for my parents forcing me, I don’t think I would go to church every Sunday. I just don’t see the importance of learning the same things over and over again, it is so boring. The only good part is the treats.” I struggle to find an answer. “I also have a problem with the temple. Why do we need to get married there? I’m going to get married on the beach in California!” My legs jitter up and down, side to side. I know I need to answer, to defend my beliefs and goals, the goals that Cassie should have too. My mouth opens, and promptly shuts.

My mind is spinning, thinking of ways to defend my beliefs and straighten her out. My heart beat increases, but I know what needs to be said. I open my mouth one more time, and let

the words stumble out. “The temple is a really important place, where you can be sealed with you family for all time and eternity! You can’t receive those blessings anywhere else.” I pause, thinking of a compromise. “Maybe you can have your reception on the beach!”

The jitters felt moments before were starting to subside. That wasn’t so bad.

My one o’clock class on Tuesday’s and Thursday’s is terrifying, like the Twilight Zone ride, and today is the drop of the elevator. We are put into groups of five, and instructed to rank the nine pieces, designed by our classmates, in order of good, better, and best using ethos, pathos, and logos. Forty minutes later we gather once more around the whiteboard to examine where our classmates placed us in comparison to our peers, and discuss whether they were right or not. The critique is brutal for some of the designers as we talk about whether designs fit the criteria and whether or not they have acceptable craftsmanship. “Class, what did you learn about ranking your peers?” The silence was unbearable, like fast and testimony meeting. For the third time in two weeks, the second time that class, my fingers wiggle in anticipation, and my arm snakes up.

“Belen?” he calls. Time slows. The chaotic thoughts in my mind straighten, and pour out of my mouth in a straight line as I begin to speak.

“I noticed that it was easier to base our judgment off of what we “liked,” but once we started discussing the craftsmanship, emotion, and creativity that come with ethos, logos, and pathos, it was easier to agree on which design was best and why, along with where it should be place on the scale in relation to the other designs in the group.” My heart wasn’t pounding this time.

“Well spoken, Belen. Two gold stars for you.”