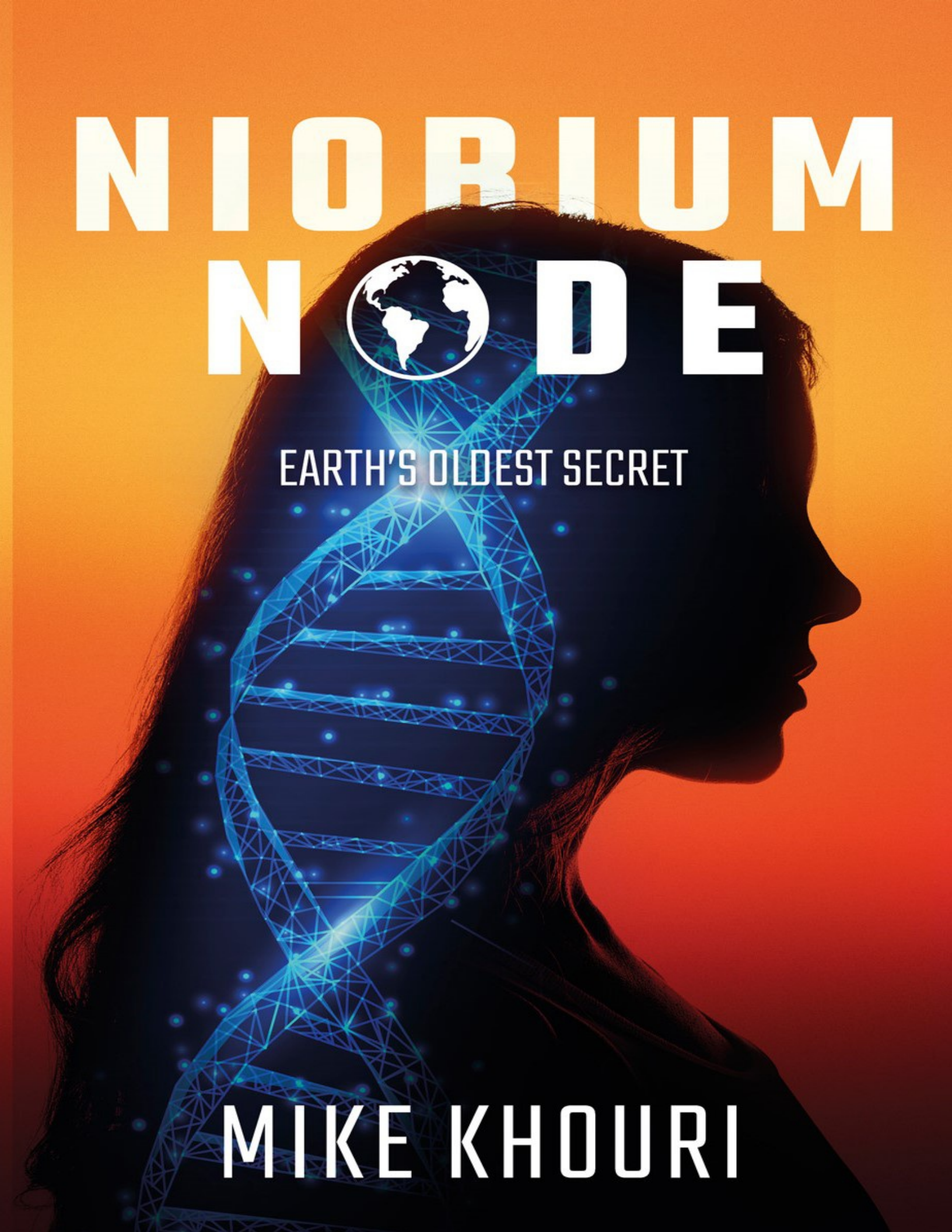
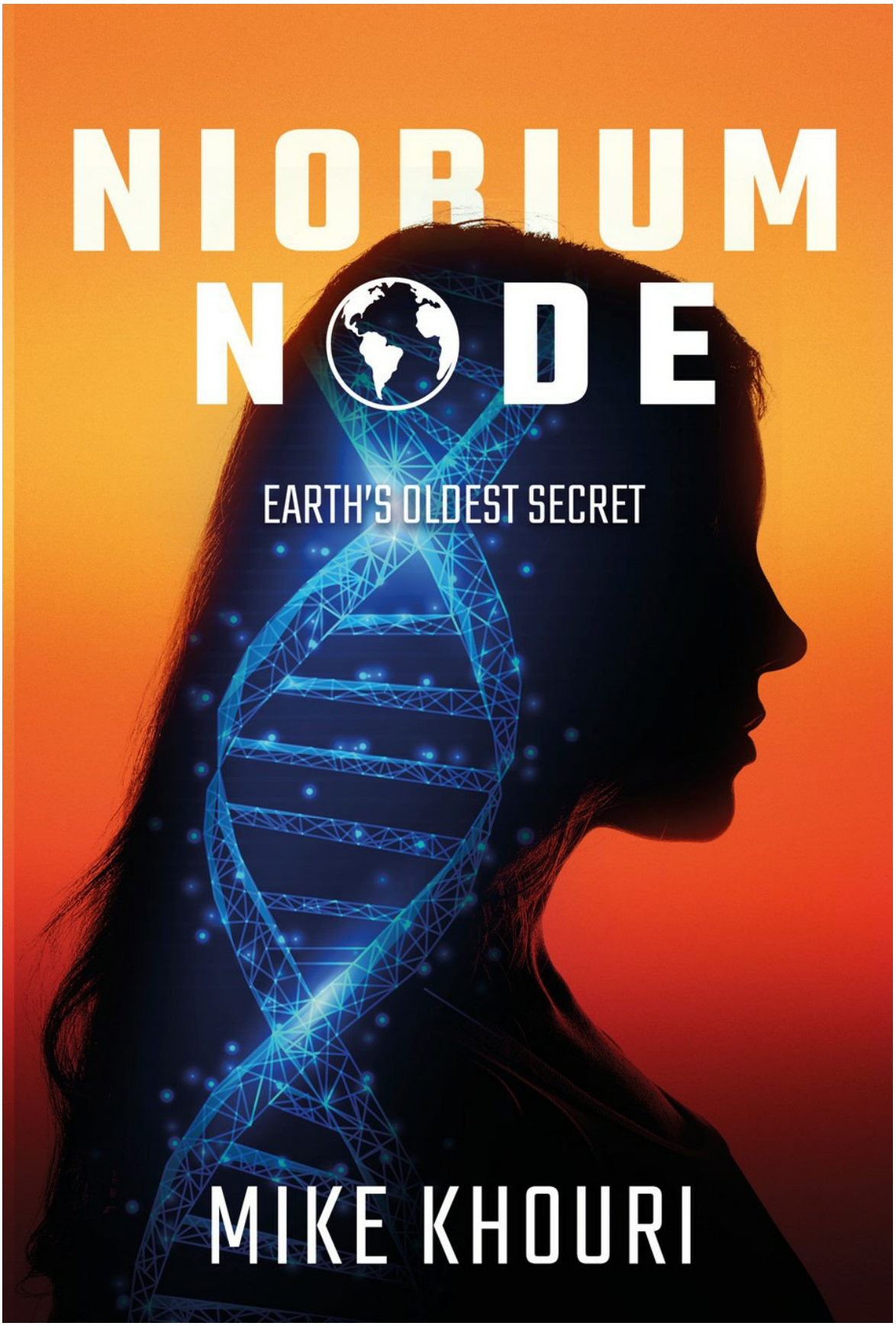
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EARTH'S OLDEST SECRET

MIKE KHOURI


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Earth's Oldest Secret

Mike Khouri

For Editorial Review Only

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To my dearest G and K, and our guardian angels N, T, and M.

Your sacrifices will not go in vain, as the Chrismere code is now in the Burkington sequence. Enlightenment begins in Natalia's cradle, in the shadow of the tree of knowledge.

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Chapter 1: Divine Intervention

It was an unusually warm Thursday afternoon. The air was humid and thick with a sense of trepidation, or was it excitement? *Trepidation for what?* Gada wondered, wiping a bead of sweat from her brow. *Nothing exciting ever happens to me.* She was seated at the front of the class during the final period of the day at Vermont High School—close enough that she could smell Ms. Ester's musky perfume every time she pirouetted to face the whiteboard. Whenever she turned her back on the class to continue her lecture on the French revolution and the rise of modern societies, Gada could hear the other students' conversations around her increasing in pitch and volume, and saw one or two spitballs miss the back of Ms. Ester's head by a matter of inches. However, Gada was *different*, or at the very least, she had always felt different, although she couldn't quite put a finger on why she felt this way. History enthralled her, and she had somewhat of a soft spot for Ms. Ester, who seemed to be the target of an array of different bullying techniques from students and the faculty alike (likely because she always smelled a little of cat urine and couldn't seem to tame her scraggly gray mane). Consequently, Gada did her best to seem as present as possible, so that poor Ms. Ester wouldn't feel that her passionate delivery of facts had gone to waste.

"Without the French revolution, a lot of European countries might still have been monarchies today," Ms. Ester concluded, passively weaving between desks as her curly grey hair bounced up and down as if it had a mind of its own. "Who can tell me what King Louis the Fourteenth's nickname was and why it was such a far cry from the opinions that the citizens of France later held about King Louis the Sixteenth, his grandson?"

The class was thrust into a deafening silence as her shrill voice bounced off of the room's walls. No one answered. Despite Ms. Ester's frail appearance, none of her students dared to mess with her directly or to be openly defiant. She had been given many nicknames by pupils who had undermined her in the past, from "The Gray Monster" to "The Banshee." Gada thought otherwise; she knew that Ms. Ester was supportive and fair when it came to academics. Plus, she appreciated that Ms. Ester never mixed her social life with her job. Did she have a husband? Perhaps children? Nobody knew because she never spoke about any of it. *I wouldn't mind being like her one day,* Gada thought, *even if I do end up getting called "The Banshee."*

"No one? Okay," Ms. Ester continued. "We'll get to that later then. In many ways, the French revolution was the largest step in societal evolution since cave dwellers first formed organized villages. Can any of you tell me what 'evolution' is?" Ms. Ester asked,

her tone notably more stern. Half of the class immediately diverted their gaze to the classroom's walls, floor, or ceiling in an attempt to avoid making eye contact with her. She surveyed the room with her sharp sea-green eyes, like a hawk looking for a rodent (or an absent-minded student) to grab. Mike raised his hand, promptly ending her hunt.

"Go on," she affirmed.

"Well, we learned about evolution from Ms. Peregrine in biology class years ago. It describes how living things change over a long period of time," Mike said, nodding his head as if to assure himself that he was correct. He looked over at Gada, who in return winked at him, gave him a subtle thumbs-up, and swiped a loose curl back behind her ear before grinning cheekily at him. "Societal evolution is probably much the same? Small changes within a society that take place over thousands, if not millions, of years until the original society is almost unrecognizable."

I can't believe that I used to hate this kid, Gada smiled, quietly reminiscing about her friendship with the once chubby blond boy who had since turned into a rather dashing, ashen-haired young man. *Although, to be fair, he was nothing short of an absolute annoyance when I first met him in junior high: Always trying to show me up when it came to schoolwork.* Gada and Mike had bonded over a science project that they had been forced to complete together a year or so after the first meeting. *I realized he wasn't a total punishment to have around when he was semi-decent at algebraic expressions, although he still believes he can do them better than I do, which is untrue,* Gada grinned, looking over at Mike's masculine side profile. Lots of the other kids subtly dodged Gada, some even claimed to find her intimidating, but Mike had never gotten tired of her. *In fact, he still tries to convince me he's smarter than I am every now and then,* she thought, *but I suspect he has started making peace with the fact that he isn't.*

She flung her dark ponytail over her shoulder as Mike continued rambling on about micro- and macro-evolution. Despite being a bookworm and self-proclaimed nerd, there was nothing about Gada's appearance that suggested that she was geeky in the slightest. She was markedly tall, enough so that some unkind kids had once made a point of calling her "Giant Gada" for an entire year in primary school. The regular bullying and mocking from her peers hadn't hardened her heart though—she refused to let it. Her mother, a staunch Abenaki woman, taught her that the only real mark of beauty was kindness. The Abenaki bands of the northeastern United States were well known for their welcoming demeanor and friendliness, a tradition that she sometimes felt slightly burdened by.

"Fair enough, thank you, Michael. Does anyone else have something different to say about evolution?" Ms. Ester continued her line of questioning, interrupting Gada's train of thought. The students remained silent; a few even started stowing their books away in their backpacks in anticipation of the class's end. Gada made eye contact with a homely

girl named Ashley just as she managed to shove her notebook into one of her bag's cramped compartments. Gada didn't know Ashley very well; they had economics together but distinctly remembered hearing her admit that she'd rather end every day with detention than with a class as boring as history. Gada couldn't imagine a world in which history wasn't interesting.

"Humankind evolved over millions of years," Ms. Ester reiterated. "Both biologically, as homo erectus became homo sapiens, and in the societal sense as the world started moving away from absolute monarchs and embraced democracy. Unlike religious beliefs, science does not allow for the theological theory of 'divine intervention,' not in our biological processes and not in the development of our societies." She looked up as if trying to recall something important before she continued. "Evolution is indeed a process that describes the changes that occur in living things over a long time, exactly the way Michael explained." Ms. Ester started again: "The evolution of the..."

P-taf.....P-taf, P-taf.....P-taf.....P-taf

Without warning, a thunderous vibration from the loud cracks resonated eerily through the hallway, abruptly breaking everyone's train of thought. A bone-chilling screech echoed in the classroom from a student seated in the back. Others froze still in their seats with their eyes wide open and locked on Ms. Ester. The teacher, visibly distressed, stared at the door of the classroom with a panicky scowl. She appeared muddled at what she had just heard.

Bweep...Bweep...Bweep...

Before Ms. Ester could utter a word, the school siren sounded with a startling blare, anchoring everyone's thoughts into a dark chasm of sheer terror. It was a penetrating sound no teacher or student ever wanted to hear.

Gada, startled, turned around to Mike and silently mouthed the words, "Oh -no!" Mike gawked back at Gada in panic, his jaw dropping and his face void of color. Unable to utter anything coherent back to Gada. Unexpectedly, Ms. Ester yelled out, "ACTIVE SHOOTER!" Knocking both Gada and Mike out of their stupor. The teacher's shriek startled the other students into a frenzy. "Someone, help me push the desks against the door, quickly!" Ms. Ester yelled out while her eyes were locked in a staring match with the door. "Cindy, bring me that fire extinguisher behind you, quickly!" Ms. Ester added as she pointed at the large red canister. She knew that it might come in handy if the shooter tried to pry their way into the classroom. She also knew it wouldn't stop an aggressor, but it might slow them down.

Bobby and Mike rushed to the front of the class, nearly in a mechanical demeanor, and began pushing Ms. Ester's heavy desk towards the door. Cindy swiftly handed the teacher the fire extinguisher and rushed back to her desk, skidding to a stop on her

knees while huddling back down. The other students started dropping to the floor and crouching underneath their desks as their training kicked in, overcoming their immobility.

The training and numerous drill sessions the school invested in had paid off well so far. The students knew what they had to do and did so, ever so silently, as to not attract any shooter towards them. Not Gada; she wasn't the type to easily get startled. For some odd reason, her overwhelming curiosity needed to look outside the window, and her urge to analyze the situation overtook her immobilizing fear.

Ms. Ester cautiously peered through the small door window to see if she could spot anyone in the hallway. Startled, she suddenly jumped back, her palm instinctively covering her mouth, catching a glimpse of two security guards whipping by her constrained view. They were running towards the other end of the hallway with their guns drawn. She quickly turned around to the students and gestured with both hands out, "Everybody, stay down!" with a glaze of distress on her face, she firmly and quietly spoke out to them. They all quickly huddled against the floor, staring right back at her with their eyes eerily wide open.

"Gada, get down!" Ms. Ester resolutely articulated as she stared deeply annoyed at Gada standing in front of the window.

"Sorry, Ms. Ester," Gada quietly replied as she hunched down next to her desk, "I just wanted to see if anything was going on outside."

The siren suddenly stopped, and the school loudspeaker blared out with the principals' distinctive voice, piercing through the terrifying mindset that had come across them, "Attention, Attention, to all staff and students. This was a false alarm. There is no active shooter on the premises. If anyone saw who had set off the fire-crackers in the hallway, please report them immediately to the principal's office or the security officers. This immature behavior will not be tolerated in our school."

For a brief moment, a pause of silence lingered in the air. A surreal and dumbfounded look was etched on the faces of everyone in the classroom. The silence was gradually broken as the student's murmuring came back to life from the abyss they were thrown into just a few moments ago.

"OK, everyone, let's settle down," Ms. Ester calmly called out, shaking her head in antipathy, "Everyone, push your desks back into their places and take your seats. Let's settle down, please. We've had enough excitement for today."

Gada and Mike glanced at each other for a moment with an assuring nod and cynical smile. "I can't wait till this year is over," Mike whispered to Gada with his head nodding in disgust.

It took a few minutes, but everyone finally settled uneasily back into their seats. Ms. Ester regaining her composure, spoke calmly, “Class is almost over for this afternoon, but I think we shouldn't let anyone distract us from getting our education. Let's not let them win, and let's pretend this distraction never happened."

Ms. Ester closed her eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, and continued, "Just like Michael was telling us just before the drama that was thrust upon us, evolution is indeed a process that describes the changes that occur in living things over a long time." Ms. Ester calmly started again: "The evolution of our species was ..."

"Excuse me, Ms. Ester," Gada interrupted.

Ms. Ester gave her a sharp look, a flash of irritation darting through her icy blue-green eyes. "Gada, what could you possibly be excused for? Or did you just think that interrupting me is the best way of getting my attention? I assume you have yet *another* question for me..."

Gada gulped. She was well-known by all of the educators for her inquisitive nature, but she'd be lying if she said that she wasn't aware that her regular questions (which often led to lengthy sermons) irritated her fellow students. They wanted to get out of class as quickly as possible, and she wanted to learn as much as possible—the very definition of conflicting interests.

"Here we go again," someone sang from the back of the class. "Little Miss Know-It-All needs to know it all!" The comment earned a round of roaring laughter from the others; only Mike abstained and managed to keep a straight face.

Gada wished she hadn't opened her mouth. Anxiously fidgeting with a piece of paper, she started, "If it's true that science does not allow for the theological theory of divine intervention, then how do you explain why we went through billions of years of primitive evolution, and then suddenly, within the span of a few thousand years, we became intelligent human beings and experienced the birth pangs of a societal structure?" Her fellow students started sniggering again.

"Calm down class!" Ms. Ester remarked. "I will not have this kind of malicious behavior in my classroom! Give Gada a chance to finish."

Gada continued, "It would make more logical sense to me that there was some kind of external intervention. Even the Old Testament has a more plausible hypothesis with its creation story!" she stated passionately. "Something must have happened! I'm not claiming to know what that 'something' was, but it had to have been something almost unimaginable." She loudly exhaled as she finished her sentence, causing her overgrown fringe to flop around wildly on her forehead. Mike smirked at her, a look of pride crept its way up onto his face, curling his mouth at the edges.

"An interesting perspective, Gada. Good question. The truth is science and religion disagree. The relationship between the two domains of knowledge and history is complex. Science has its own theory of civilization, and it isn't ready to give any credit to divine intervention. Centuries back, religious beliefs in divine intervention were even more uncommon than they are now. Prior to this, science was referred to as natural philosophy," Ms. Ester alleged as she paged through the textbook, trying to get more facts from it. Gada anxiously looked at her teacher. She expected a more satisfying answer. Ms. Ester continued, "You see, scientific hypotheses, unlike religious ones, are in principle provable. The history of humankind, according to science, is very different from religious beliefs. With the help of fossils, the remains of every living thing can be found in old rock formations, proving that prehistoric humans, animals, and plants were very different from those we see today."

That doesn't really answer my question, Gada thought, furrowing her brow. She decided to let it go, Ms. Ester was clearly having a hard time shedding light on the subject, and she didn't want to annoy her any further.

"I hope this helps your understanding of the topic, Gada. However, we don't have much time left and a lot to go through. See me after school tomorrow, and we can discuss it some more," she told her, still feverishly paging through the textbook.

Gada needed to know more despite not wanting to push the envelope. She was not convinced of the scientific explanation for human evolution and the development of societies yet. *I'll just have to do my own research,* she told herself. *How hard can it be to web-search some ancient civilizations?*

Ms. Ester resumed her lecture, ostensibly relieved that Gada had dropped the matter. "You see, science tells us that we weren't the only 'humans' that evolved, so we're not necessarily that special. We're just a statistical anomaly. Neanderthals were considered early 'humans' too; between 350,000 BCE and 30,000 BCE, they thrived throughout the continent of Eurasia. There is some evidence that Neanderthals interbred with modern humans. We all share a small portion of Neanderthal DNA," she said as her students sniggered at each other. "So you see, we were just lucky to have made it long enough to develop technology and civilization, as our species could have easily met the same fate. Their disappearance puzzles scientists..." the bell rang, abruptly cutting her off. "Alright class, that's a wrap. See you tomorrow!" she waved as groups of students started stampeding toward the door.

Gada wished she could stay a little longer to have a private conversation with the history teacher about evolution and the theory of divine intervention, but Mike was already gesturing for her to leave the class with him. *It's impossible to say no to him*, she grinned, grabbing her backpack and rushing toward the door.

Mike and Gada headed toward their lockers, walking shoulder-to-shoulder. "I would be lying if I told you I wasn't thrilled with the question you asked. You think deeper than anyone," Mike said, blushing slightly.

"That was just one of the questions I have. I have many more that I need answers to. I didn't want to give Ms. Ester a harder time than I already had," she explained, smiling sheepishly at her companion. "Sometimes, I feel like I'm nothing but an irritation with all of my questions, but once something pops into my head, I just can't let it go. Do you know what I mean?"

Mike held her in a sort of half-hug. "Can't say I know the feeling, but I find the way you obsess over things very endearing. Is the deal still on?" He asked hopefully.

"Sure, I already told my mom I was going to be home late because we'd be working on a science project at your house after school," Gada enthused. "I'm sorry I've been canceling our plans so often lately. I've... just had a lot going on. I promise I won't bail on this one."

"Perfect!" Mike grinned. "I was starting to worry you might not like me anymore... You know, as a friend, I mean."

"Don't be silly," Gada chortled, ruffling Mike's hair. "You're my best buddy, and you're stuck with me forever."

"Forever, hmm? I certainly hope so," Mike mumbled, turning scarlet. "What do you think about the way Ms. Ester answered your question?" he prodded, desperately trying to change the subject.

"Answered? I wouldn't use that word to describe the conversation we had," she whispered back, looking around in an attempt to make sure that no one else heard her speaking badly of a teacher.

"I've wondered about the same thing you asked about in class today before too... But everyone seems entirely averse to talking about it. The history of human evolution is complex. Science states that we are the descendants of apes but won't even entertain the idea that something bigger had a hand in it," Mike confessed. "I'm not saying that any of the religious theories make sense to me either, but I definitely can't imagine going from ape to Artificial Intelligence without some kind of intervention."

"I agree. As much as I'd love to admit that Ms. Ester is correct, I still feel there's more to it," Gada concurred.

"We'll do some research. Maybe we can come up with a more concrete explanation than Ms. Ester was able to give," Mike suggested, swinging open his locker's creaky door to stow away a handful of textbooks.

“Maybe we can start today?” Gada asked, raising one of her bushy eyebrows. “I was thinking that if we started by examining ancient civilizations, we might be able to find out when exactly the jump into modernity happened. Once we know when it happened, we can try to suss out what the catalyst was.”

“Determined to win a Nobel Prize before the week’s over?” Mike chortled, wrapping one of his arms around her shoulders as they made their way toward the parking lot. “You know I love your inquisitive nature, but maybe some things are just impossible to understand? I don’t think we should be too hard on ourselves if we can’t find an answer to all of this,” he vaguely gestured.

By now, the parking lot was mostly empty except for the scarce faculty members’ cars and two stray cats that were loitering about. Mike ran ahead, leaving Gada quietly making her way across the tarmac alone. When she looked up again, Mike was leaning against his pickup with his arms and legs crossed like some kind of James Dean lookalike.

Gada knew that he was trying to strike a pose without being too obvious about it, but her heart skipped a beat at the sight of him anyway. *I just can’t seem to think straight when he’s around these days,* she thought. *I have to force myself to focus! He’s a friend, nothing more.* She was more than aware of the fact that her ever-growing fondness of him stood a fair chance of ruining their unique friendship, her only friendship. *My mom always says I shouldn’t think about boys until I’m done with high school, and there’s less than a year of it left;* she told herself as she approached him, desperately trying to steady her breathing and hide her trembling legs. *Not that I think he’ll have much time for me after high school,* Gada admitted to herself. She knew that they would probably end up in different colleges, and by then, she would probably have gotten over the crush she harbored for him. Regardless, the thought of being apart from him somehow pained her.

“What are you smiling at?” she asked as she approached him, catching a glimpse of her own reflection in his sunglasses. “You look ridiculous leaning against the car like that. Get in before someone sees us.” She tried to usher him into the driver’s seat, but he was slow to comply and purposefully sluggish.

“Like what you see?” Mike questioned, flexing each of his pectoral muscles (or ‘pecs’ as he referred to them) in turn. He’d always been an overweight child, but something had happened to him over the previous spring break, and he had returned back to school about a foot taller and far more muscular.

Gada went deathly pale. “What are you talking about?” she insisted.

“I saw the way you were looking at me,” Mike teased. “I was just wondering if you were enjoying the view…”

“In your dreams, Mike,” she angrily stated, slapping his shoulder. “I was staring because I can’t believe how weird-looking you are. Now, are we leaving sometime soon, or are you planning on keeping me here all day?”

“I was only playing with you,” he said as he darted away from her to open the passenger side door for her to enter, “Mi-lady, entrée,” he sang in his best French accent.

“Don’t leave your day job, kid,” Gada joked, sliding into the pickup’s stained gray passenger side seat. “I don’t think you have a future in impressions or impersonations.”

“Harsh,” he responded, revving the pickup truck’s engine and speeding out of the parking lot. After a couple of minutes of awkward silence, they slowly turned into his driveway and were warmly welcomed by Mrs. Corey, Mike’s mom, who was working in the garden. She was a short, chubby woman with a contagious smile. Gada couldn’t remember a single instance in which she’d seen Mrs. Corey without a glass of red wine in one of her hands.

“Gada, it’s so lovely to see you. Where have you been? We thought that you and Mike might have had a spat… And oh my, have you not been eating? Look how skinny you are!” she gasped, ushering her into the house. “I just baked an apple pie, and your timing is perfect. Mike, will you fetch the whipped cream from the fridge, please?” Gada smiled apologetically at Mike as he scurried toward the large kitchen’s furthest corner. He returned with a bright white can and unceremoniously plopped it down in front of his mom.

“I’ll be upstairs in my room,” Mike stated, turning on his heel and disappearing from view.

“What’s wrong with him?” Mrs. Corey asked, shoveling a spoonful of pie into her mouth.

“I wish I knew,” Gada sighed, picking at the contents of her own plate. “Things have been weird lately…”

“Between the two of you?” Mrs. Corey inquired, arching her eyebrows in surprise.

“No… just in a general kind of way. I don’t really have the words to explain it,” Gada replied defeatedly. “I guess I just feel like something big is supposed to happen to me, but I don’t quite know what it is yet. I think Mike feels it too.”

“Oh, that’s just called growing up, honey!” Mrs. Corey said supportively, squeezing her shoulder as she started clearing their plates. “I still feel like I’m supposed to accomplish something great, and I’ve been a housewife for more than twenty years.”

“Maybe you still will?” Gada suggested, nonchalantly wiping the remaining crumbs off of her chest.

“Hmm, that’s sweet of you to say,” Mrs. Corey giggled, piling dishes into the sink. “You know Gada, Mike hasn’t been himself since you started canceling your plans with him at the last minute. I don’t want to burden you with it, but he’s so happy when you’re around, and that makes me happy too,” she sniffed. “I think Mike actually likes…”

She was cut off as Mike loudly shouted down the staircase. “Gada, come on! We don’t have all day! Are we going to study or not?”

Mrs. Corey smiled at Gada as she stood up. “Thanks for the pie Mrs. Corey; it was delicious,” Gada grinned. “I’d be around every day if I knew that there would be apple pie!”

“Come back tomorrow? I promise I’ll save you another slice until then…” she called after Gada as she rushed out of the room and up the steep staircase.

Mike’s room was spacious and neatly arranged; Mrs. Corey ensured all her boys were tidy and organized. His bed was meticulously made, a temptation that was simply too great to resist. Gada took a short running start and launched herself onto his duvet, sending half of his pillows flying.

“Gada…” Mike started, catching one of his pillows mid-air and returning it to its proper spot.

“What?” she questioned.

“Nothing,” he grumbled, digging through his backpack to find the science homework that they needed to work on. “I think we should each choose three chapters to summarize, and then we’ll merge all of our findings at the end…”

“How would you explain science’s view on sidelining the theological theories of divine intervention?” Gada interrupted, entirely unable to stop the words from spewing out of her mouth.

“Ahh! Not again,” Mike muttered, knowing very well that Gada was not the type to simply drop the matter. He attempted to end the conversation by turning his back on her and scribbling away in his notebook.

“Technically, finding out how humans really came into existence is science,” Gada cooed, shuffling across the bed’s now-wrinkled surface until she was sitting directly behind him. She twirled one of his short blond locks around her index finger. “Please, Mike?” she pleaded. “I promise we’ll get back to our normal science homework in an hour or two after we’ve done a little bit of research…”

Mike dramatically slumped over in his chair, then sat up to answer her. “Fine, I’ll play along. We can research whatever you want, but I see no reason why science would agree

with the theory of divine intervention. Science and religion have contradicted each other since time immemorial, and I don't think that will end any time soon. However, I also agree that humans likely didn't just mysteriously appear from thin air. I think there must've been some kind of intervention that resulted in the creation of present-day humans. I agree with your entire premise Gada, but I don't know if we should waste any time on it. If the world's best scientists can't give us concrete answers, what would make you think that we can stumble onto any?"

"Because we're willing to consider things that those scientists won't," she stubbornly asserted.

"Fine. I'll help you search for evidence of your hypothesized divine intervention, but we've got to put a solid two hours into this science project first. We've got to keep our priorities straight."

"Fine," Gada defeatedly sighed, withdrawing her own notebook and textbook from her backpack. She moped as she opened her textbook to one of the chapters at hand and started highlighting bits of information that she deemed important with a neon yellow pen. "What are you going to study next year?" she decided to nonchalantly ask, hoping to break the silence.

Mike looked up, seemingly startled by the question. "You've never asked me what I want to be before? Why the sudden interest?"

"Well, the year's almost over… And I was just wondering what you'd be doing next year and whether it would be anywhere close to what I'll be doing next year," she blushed. "You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"No, I know exactly what I want to do, and it's not a state secret. I've applied to a number of different colleges' engineering and science programs: Oxford, Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, Columbia…" he trailed off, his eyes glistening. "Anyway, I'd rather not get ahead of myself. I haven't heard anything back from any of them. Do you think I'd be a good engineer if I got accepted into one of the engineering programs?" he asked, nervously tugging at a piece of thread that had come loose on his shirt.

"C'mon, of course you would! You'd be an amazing engineer," Gada enthused. "Any of those schools would be lucky to have you. I bet they're just getting ready to get their bids in."

"What about you? What are you doing next year? Or at least, what do you hope to be doing next year?" Mike asked, rhythmically tapping his pen on his desk's tabletop.

Gada sighed, knowing she had no answers to give; it was surreal but true. Although she and Mike had bonded over math and science, she wasn't sure whether she should

consider a different field of study altogether. “What would you say if I told you I have no idea?” she asked.

“You can’t be serious,” Mike gasped, throwing his pen into the air with surprise. “A lot of colleges won’t be accepting applications for much longer. You need to decide what you want to do as soon as possible if you’re hoping to be able to apply in time for next year.”

“I am serious,” she cheekily grinned. “I’m not purposefully trying to be rebellious or to freak anyone out. I just haven’t figured it out yet. I guess I was just asking because I wanted to know where you had applied, so that I could apply there too,” she added. “High school friendships don’t normally survive the college years, and I don’t want to lose what we have…”

“Gada, I have something I’d like to say to you,” Mike interrupted, a sense of urgency filling the air. “And I’d like to tell you before I help you to win a Nobel Prize or run off to an Ivy League university for four years.”

“Go for it,” Gada smiled, hopping up and down on his bed’s bouncy surface in an attempt to distract herself from the awkwardness of the moment. “Hey, maybe we’ll end up at the same university together, and there’ll be no need for this ‘running off’ business,” she said optimistically.

“I really like you, Gada,” he sighed, averting his gaze.

“Aww, I really like you too, Mike!” Gada softly replied. “You’re a great guy…”

“I know you like me, but I mean, I like you *a lot,*” Mike went further. “Getting to know you has been amazing and a privilege.” Mike stood up and turned to face Gada. He gently took her hand and pulled her up so that she was standing in front of him. He held his breath for a moment and then continued, “Gada, I want to be more than a friend to you. I want to mean more to you. I want to be a part of your life forever, like we said. I know the feeling might not be mutual, but I promise I won’t make things awkward if it isn’t. I am going to respect your decision, whatever it may be… But please, say something,” Mike begged, squeezing her hand tighter and tighter with every syllable that he let slip through his rambling lips.

Gada opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Then after a short pause, she finally replied, “I like you too Mike, and in the same way.” Her heart beat feverishly in her chest like a wild bird beating against the bars of its cage. She slumped back down onto the bed and stared off into the distance before continuing, “I’d like to be more than friends… If that’s what you’d like?”

“Really, the almighty Gada Deere likes me back?” Mike asked, making Gada giggle like a bashful 5-year-old girl. “Does this mean we’re… You know? Boyfriend and girlfriend?”

Mike asked clumsily. “I mean, we don’t have to put a label on it if you don’t want to. We could even keep it a secret…”

“Of course, it means I’m your girlfriend now, silly,” Gada chuckled, rolling her eyes and pulling him down beside her so that they were sitting next to each other on what was once an immaculately made bed. “We don’t have to keep it a secret. You can shout it to the world if you’d like. It’s not like I’m ashamed of you or something. Just promise to do me a favor and wait until I’ve left before you tell your mom? I know she’s going to be overjoyed, and I just don’t have the energy to deal with it today.”

“Pinky promise,” Mike agreed, lifting his little finger as a grin slowly crept across his face. “To be honest, I’m still trying to come to grips with it. I thought you’d definitely turn me away.”

“What made you think that?” Gada asked, resting her head against one of his broad shoulders.

“You’re just a little out of my league, and I wasn’t sure whether you wanted someone… Better? Stronger? Smarter? I don’t know. I just didn’t think you would want me. I’ve already taken my good crying pillow out of the cupboard in preparation for the weeping session I’d have tonight, and now… All for naught!”

“You’re a real clown, Mike,” Gada chuckled, pecking him on the cheek. She was interrupted by her cellphone’s shrill ringtone. It was her mom. A shiver ran down her spine, she was late for dinner back home, and they hadn’t worked on the assignment yet. She decided to answer.

“Gada Deere, where on Earth are you?” her mom’s angry voice crackled through the speaker. “Dinner is getting cold!”

“Sorry mom! I swear, I’m on my way! We’re getting into the car right now,” she fibbed as she started hastily packing her books away with one hand. “I’ll be there in a couple of minutes.”

She hung up and nodded at Mike, who had heard the conversation. “Time to go,” she said. “Sorry, I wish I could stay longer…”

“Don’t worry about it,” Mike nonchalantly scoffed, kissing her forehead. “I’ll wrap up the science assignment and put both of our names on it. Now, let’s get to the car! It’s best not to keep your mom waiting.”

Gada waved at Mrs. Corey in passing as they scrambled down the stairs and back toward the pickup truck. Mike dropped her off at home, but not before attempting a somewhat awkward kiss goodbye. Gada turned to leave just as he leaned in to bestow it, leading to him planting it firmly behind her right ear. They both pretended that it didn’t happen.

Gada hopped out of the truck, waved at him, and shouted, “See you tomorrow!” as she darted up the overgrown pathway leading to her front door.

“I’m home,” Gada called out as she strode inside.

“You missed dinner!” Mrs. Deere called out from the kitchen. “Yours is in the microwave, but I suspect it’s freezing cold already.”

“I’m sorry Mom,” she apologetically sighed, making her way toward the kitchen and consequently the microwave that contained her apparently arctic meal. The kitchen was old, and the counters were all lined with an orange resin laminate, which was faded and beginning to peel off. It was indicative of the state of the other parts of the house. There was always something needing repair. Last week, the pipe leading to the sink broke when everyone was away. Mike and Gada had fixed it with duct tape, but a plumber still hadn’t been out to fix it.

“Why’s it so cold in here?” Gada asked, rubbing her upper arms in an attempt to generate some warmth. “Did you guys forget to turn on the heater?” she asked, squinting at her mom, who was washing dishes, and her dad, who was seated at the kitchen counter, reading a newspaper.

“Nah, we didn’t forget,” her dad replied without looking up.

“Then why’s it off? It’s freezing at night. At this rate, I’m going to die of hypothermia!” Gada dramatically motioned as she grabbed her plate of cold pasta from the microwave.

He said nothing but looked uneasy as he sipped his coffee to prevent him from having to answer her question. Her mother looked at him, walked over, and lightly touched his shoulder. Gada knew that gesture—her mother was trying to be supportive.

What is happening? She wondered.

“We thought we could save some money by cutting down on the amount of electricity we use in the house. You can see we need the money to make some repairs and to do some maintenance…” her mother answered gently.

“But it’s only going to get colder as the week wears on! That’s what the weather forecast says! It was freezing this morning,” Gada stubbornly argued.

“We’ll deal with it one day at a time, darling,” her mother replied, looking unsure.

Gada knew they were having issues with money. However, she didn’t think it had gotten so bad they had to cut down on the electricity they used. She wished there was a way she could help out, maybe get a job or something, but she knew what her parents would say about that. The same thing they always said whenever she brought up the topic.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get everything fixed in no time,” her dad lied, leaning in to touch his shoulder to hers. “We won’t be cold for long. We just have to make it through this little rough patch.”

“Fine,” Gada sighed defeatedly, melting into a chair next to her father.

Her father was a staunch adherent to the culture and beliefs of the Abenaki people, and theirs stated that a man should always be able to provide for his family. Being unable to do so was obviously making her dad feel like a failure. The beat-down house and his inability to fix it up well (or to even dream of buying a new one) ate at him more than anything else. Gada saw her parents’ struggles, how her father had to keep three jobs and her mother had to work two to maintain things at home, but her hands were tied to help.

They had inherited the house they lived in now from her great-grandfather, and her grandfather had refurbished it. Her great-grandfather had built the house as a refuge for natives who were being hunted by those who supported the eugenics programs that they so often fell victim to.

However, with time, the hunting stopped, and the natives left to start families of their own in homes of their own, leaving their benefactor behind with his wife and two-year-old son, her father. The house wasn’t built to accommodate many people, but they had made it work. Her grandfather once told her that they sometimes had over fifty people living in the house at once. Gada sometimes closed her eyes to imagine what it must have been like. It was almost impossible to picture.

“How did your visit with Mike go?” her dad asked, cheekily changing the subject and drawing Gada back to reality.

“It wasn’t a visit. We were doing homework. It went… Different than I thought it would. He asked me to be his girlfriend,” she admitted, shoveling a forkful of pasta into her mouth in an effort to avoid the subject. She didn’t hide anything from her parents, but she wasn’t sure how they’d react to the news either.

Her mother squealed as she excitedly clapped and jumped up and down. “I told you the boy had a crush on you. It was written all over his face every time he visited,” her mom trilled as Gada rolled her eyes. “I want to hear all about it! What did he say? What did he do?”

Gada shared the tale of Mike’s confession, leaving out some of the more embarrassing details. She enjoyed the moments that she shared with her parents. She knew the time she had left with them was limited; she would soon go off to college and begin her own life. She wanted to make every moment with them count. Her dad listened to her

recounting the series of events too, pretending to give it his full attention while his nose drew ever closer to the newspaper's surface.

"I think it's time for some glasses, dad," Gada teased as she finished her story. "Nobody should have to touch their face to the paper in order to be able to read what has been written on it."

"Maybe after we get the sink fixed," he smiled warmly. "Until then, the newspaper will just have to make peace with me invading its personal space."

After dinner, Gada retired to her room and quietly laid on her bed. She had a whole slew of new questions and thoughts ringing on and on in her head. The day had been exceptionally long, and she was exceptionally tired. She thought of Mike and smiled; he'd be waiting outside in the driveway to ferry her to school again in a couple of hours. The thought of getting to see him every day for the rest of her life, as she imagined girlfriends and boyfriends did, was almost too much to bear. As much as she needed the rest, she hoped the night would be over soon.

She closed her heavy eyes and started dozing off. *What is my purpose in life? The reason for our entire existence as mankind? Are we really just here to eat, sleep, work, and repeat?* she wondered as she felt her consciousness slowly slipping away. Her dreams were filled with Ms. Ester's voice, scenes from her classroom, and visions of Mike's grinning face.



Last known picture of Gada & Mike in high school. Circa 1999