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Grade: 8

Title: Famous

The screen glowed brightly.

The din of the cars flying over the highway down below shook the building, and provided a vibration that was as a part of me as my own heartbeat. There, sitting on a bed, I was immersed. In front of me was the screen. Beside me was the screen. All around me was the screen and I was a part of it, I was swimming in it, and it was greater anything I could remember. Photos and comments and statistics reflected in my dilated pupils, flashing by like lightning. My eyes were darting around and I saw it all, I was in it all, I was in the eye of the tornado and it was beautiful. And then I read the number.

3,027 likes.

The tornado passed over me and I was swept up in it, and turbulence shook me with such great force that I was crashing before I knew I had ever flown. My eyes stopped moving. My vision fixed itself on the number and it boldened itself and enlarged itself, and there I saw it in front of me. It mocked me, it called out at me. It was a scoffer and I was a prophet and there I was crucified, bleeding, tied up on a cross held up amidst a stormy sea.

Only 3,027 likes. Only 3,027 people in this world of 10 billion liked me. That was nothing. I was nothing.

Why couldn't I just be famous?

There were others. There were people who had the masses following them, and they were gods to anyone who was anyone. I aspired to be like them, and wished to have their perfect charm, perfect complexion, and perfect life.

They didn't even have to try. They didn't edit their photos, they didn't buy their likes, and they didn't have to even advertise themselves. They just were famous.

As I read the number again, advertisements appeared in front of me, selling premium apps for selfpromotion

and fake likes. I blinked and there it was, purchased, and before I knew it

I had a thousand more likes. I knew that the money I just spent was worth a day of my mother's

pay, but she'd understand. Anyone could understand. I just needed those likes.

But I knew they weren't real.

The readings said five thousand but I knew those were just AI-controlled  
scavenger

profiles, and the true number of people who liked me was much, much lower. A wave of anger  
crashed over me suddenly, without the slightest breeze or surf to give warning. Those likes were  
fake. No one who was real could like me. No one liked me. I was hideous, I was boring, I wasn't  
worth my life, much less my profile.

I'd devoted so much on this social media and worked so hard. I'd labored and labored for  
hours just this night, working to make myself stick out in this range of profiles and photos and  
biographies and posts. I wasn't a peak, or a mountain, or a ridge, or even a foothill. I was a  
pebble in this giant stone spine of something great that was long dead. I'd gone through selfie  
after selfie

term coming back in style that hadn't been used since the '10s and  
examined the

pictures with more scrutiny than the highest chief analyst. I'd taken photo after photo after photo  
of myself, edited them beyond recognition, and when I finally became pretty, I'd shared it with  
the world. And now, ten minutes later, the number of people who'd liked it, who'd liked me,  
who'd thought that I was pretty, was smaller than the pixels of my devices.

Why doesn't anyone like me?

I was cute. I used the best apps to edit my photos, and even spent \$100 on a premium  
one. My mother was upset, and said that she had to work enough to pay off our current life debt,  
but it didn't matter. I'd heard that this one girl didn't edit her photos at all, and she had over 150  
million likes on each of her photos. The only thing between me and her was that app.

I said the right things, too. My tongue was my keyboard and I commented just the most  
charming things on countless posts. I'd made friends beyond any numbers I could name, and  
talked to more people daily than went to my school. Sure, I didn't actually care about them, but  
that wasn't the point. If I wanted people to like me, I had to be likeable. The people closest to me  
lived countries away, but I made sure to talk to them every day. I'd never met them, sure, but no

one actually was friends with people they knew. To see someone faceto face ruined it all. And

who had the time to meet up with people? If I did that, I'd lose hundreds of likes for being inactive.

I even made my account look nice. You couldn't just post whatever photos you thought looked nice. You had to make it match the previous posts. Everything had to have a theme. There wasn't a single person worth looking at who didn't monitor their photos. When an account was matched, it was balanced, and it was perfect. I'd tried to be perfect.

I looked away from the number and checked my activity notifications again. Did I gain any new likes from someone famous?

Account names spilled forth like a tidal wave, and I was immersed again. One person liked my photo who got more attention than I did. What could I say to them to make them want to be friends? Maybe if we talked, they would tell their likers to like my photos. Then, I'd have more exposure. I quickly thought up something to comment, and entered it, and waited. Time seemed to slow and that screen became an hourglass, and each grain of sand that fell was its own climax in this neverending movie. I waited longer, and still received no reply. I knew they read my comment, and looked at my photos. I knew they thought if I was worth it. I knew that they decided I wasn't. I wasn't worth it.

I looked back at my notifications to see if anyone new liked my photos. The initial spike of likes had died as my post became buried in a pile of photos in the world's news feeds. What could I do to get more likes?

I needed them. I hadn't eaten that night, but I wasn't hungry for food. Likes were my sustenance. I should post another photo, I thought, something different, something interesting. Looking at the images displayed on the screen, I absorbed all the beautiful smiles and cute clothes and artistic profiles. I had to be like them.

I wished to see the most liked photos at the moment. The screen changed with such grace that I knew the best dancers would loathe, and I was soon staring at only one photo that stood out to me among the rest. Amidst a plain sky of edited selfies were the lights of a city below. A lone person sat on the edge of a building, with their feet hanging off, and a wild, pure, beautiful smile

shining. That was what I needed. That was how I would be liked. I wanted to be like them.

I hesitated for fear of inactivity, but then swiped away the screen and was out of my room, out of my apartment, and on the roof of the highrise. The rush of the cars flying far below filled my ears with this background noise like a cascading waterfall, and for a moment I felt at the crossroads of nature and city. I'd never been to the forest, but I'd heard of what it sounded like, and this is what it was. The sky glowed yellow from the city lights, and around me were the walls of towering buildings, and below me were the dark, dirty streets. I felt free, and I felt like I was exploring something and uncovering whatever was inside each shadow. I'd always lived here, and I knew these shapes well, but it was not the same up here. The steel and glass all around me reflected differently now, and shone these spectrums of light I was blind to see but somehow saw most clearly at the same time.

But I reminded myself that I couldn't get distracted. I had to post soon, before I started losing likes. I walked quickly to the edge of the roof, and swiped at the air and willed forth the camera. I set the device a ways away and swung my legs over the ledge, and posed like I'd seen the girl do. I called the shutter to release, and then beckoned the screen closer to me. I looked at the photo, and it was almost the same as the one I'd been inspired by. That wouldn't do. I had to do something unique and original, something that would stand out. I could feel it, though. My path to fame was only a jump away.

An idea came to me. I moved my feet back onto the inside of the roof, and sat on the guard rail. Glancing down below me, I couldn't make out the individual cars flying past, and was dazed for a moment just by the sheer height. But I'd be safe. Everyone was always safe. Besides, any risk was worth prominence in the world.

I gripped the railing and swung backwards, and willed the photo to be taken right as my hair flew in the air, capturing the movement in a suspended instant. I felt myself living an eternity in that moment. With a satisfaction of knowing that I'd be rewarded with the perfect shot, I exhaled in a second that should have been an hour.

But I didn't stop swinging.

My hands slipped from the midnight dew and I suddenly felt this fire arise in my throat.

A dragon was creeping its way up from inside me and its scales rubbed against my insides. My

fingers turned to claws and my feet became one tail and I was this fire lizard falling, and I expected to lift my arms and fly but no wings had formed. My eyes turned azure and fire spewed from my mouth, and I incinerated everything including myself.

I was fire. I was fame.

And I knew that as I fell, the camera took one more photo. One of an empty roof, with only the ghost of a girl sitting, waiting for something, or someone

