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Grade: 9
Title: 60 seconds

If only I had been born sixty seconds later, I would have been a happy, privileged 1. A minute can hold the most decisive moment of your life.

If only I wasn't a 351.

11:59, December 31st, Madelyn Rose was born. Healthy, about eight pounds. Destined for a short life full of manual labor and the four years of education and weight training mandatory for 300's. Four years of hanging out with the 350's table. I was the last born that year, so the only other person in the 350's is Cassie.

"Hi Cassie," I said, sliding my tray of high-nutrition food next to her. She was small-boned, petite, and always sad. Her future would be less than pleasant if she didn't grow soon.

"Hey," she said quietly. "How was gym?"

"Never good," I said, eating the fruit and vegetables first. It freaks me out somewhat that they put growth hormones in the bread, so I try not to eat it when I can. Of course administration would hate it if they noticed I wasn't eating all my food.

We ate silently and walked outside, heading automatically to the track. Walking endless circles. Movement. That was what administration drilled into us- eat well, move fast. This was the life designed for us.

Finally the last bell rang, and we were let out. I switched on the radio powered by my bike as I started moving, the same thing I had done yesterday. The day before that. The day before that. I heard a crackly voice and I turned up the volume with a quick tap of my finger. "...in a hospital room was one minute slow- switching up two numbers, 1 and 2 from 2205. Their numbers are being sorted out as we speak. There will be a legal battle for the Greenway Public hospital."

My hands slipped and my bike rammed into the curb. I skidded a foot, the wind knocked out of me for a minute, a wheel on my bike slowly turning. I was born in 2204. This kind of mix-up was rare, but I was born with less than a minute before the new year and everyone aimed to give birth on the first of January. If it was the right room- a long shot, I knew, but maybe. I could be a 1. I could do whatever I wanted in life, go wherever I wanted. I could go to college- study animals, or be a doctor or a lawyer or anything I desired. It was a slim chance. I didn't care.

I stood my bike up and headed to my apartment. The numbers "350" were printed in big letters on the side of the building. I walked up to my small room, nodding to the administrator who kept watch outside my door. I went to the phone immediately and called my mother, expecting to leave a message. "Madelyn?" I heard instead. Her voice was soft. "Did you hear the radio?"

"Of course," I said. "That was our hospital. A minute slow. Was that our room, too?"

"I'll look into it," she said. "If it was a minute slow, that means- you would be a 1. You could live with us." My mother was a 46, and her assigned partner was a 24. Everything would work itself out. "Four.

That was our room number. I was about to call for the security footage of the hospital room- that would have the right time and the room number.”

I heard a click and the line went dead. For a minute everything was silent. I realized that I hadn’t even bothered to turn on the lights, and I flicked on the lightswitch, then sat on the hard chair at the table. The lights hummed. I kept glancing at the phone. We had a landline- any number 300 or above wasn’t allowed to have a cell. The base of the phone blinked red. Blink. Blink. Blink. Someone had left a message. I hesitated, then picked up to listen to it.

“Hello.” The voice was shy. “Ah, this is Kimi Larson. I’m a 299, year 2205. I was assigned to interview you for a project on the different ranks in our society. Please call back. Thank you.” I rubbed my finger over the delete button, then thought better of it. I put the phone back on its stand just as my mother called.

“Madelyn,” she said, giddy with excitement. “You’re a 1! Not officially, that will take about a week to fill out the paperwork for you and everyone ahead of you-”

“Everyone ahead of me?” I said.

“Of course! They have to fix the numbers. We can’t have two 1’s, now, can we?”

“Of course not,” I said. It was all very reasonable. “Someone called for an interview- I can still be interviewed as a 351, right? I wouldn’t want to mess up their assignment.”

“Go ahead,” my mother agreed. “You went through it, know what it’s like. I’ll call you tomorrow after school.”

The phone clicked again, and I looked at it. Then I listened to the message on the phone and hit “call-back” at the end.

“Hello?” the voice said. “This is Kimi.”

“Madelyn,” I said. “Madelyn Rose. You wanted to interview me about ranks?”

“Er, yes,” Kimi said. “Not over the phone. That’s a little impersonal. Do you know the cafe down on Aurora?”

“The blue one? Ocean Cafe?”

“Yes,” Kimi said. “Meet you there. Tomorrow. Five O’clock.”

“Yep,” I said as she hung up. I scribbled it down in my planner. Paper, not electronic. 300’s didn’t get electronic planners.

Sleep was hard to come by that night, and school dragged on more than usual. I didn’t tell Cassie that I was a 1, partially because I didn’t want to make her sad. When she offered to come home with me, I told her that I was meeting someone. That was partially true, but school ended at three and the interview was at five. I headed over anyway, ordering a coffee.

The workers there abided by the rules for 300’s, adding less cream than for 200’s and 100’s. Stronger and more bitter but healthier. When I was a 1, I could have the full cream. I could eat anything I wanted. The hours dragged on. Eventually I went for a walk. Most stores in this area didn’t allow 350’s, as they

had little money, but I didn't mind. I'd walk in there eventually and buy what I wanted because I wasn't just a 351 anymore.

At four forty-five I wandered back to the cafe. Someone already sat there with a sheaf of papers and a pen. Click, click, click. She stopped clicking her pen as I entered. "Are you Madelyn?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, shaking her hand.

"Kimi," she introduced herself. "Please, sit."

"So," I said. "You have questions to ask?"

"Yes," she said. "To be honest I chose you because of how close you were to being a 1. So the first question- did you ever feel- bad- that you were such a big number?" Click, click, click.

"Of course," I said. "Of course. I could have been a 1. What that would have been like! Administration keeps a closer eye on 300's than 200's than 100's. There are stricter exercise and diet regulations for bigger numbers. I have almost zero choices." It was then that I realized she was recording. She was scribbling numbers on her papers.

"Oh, don't worry," she said, noticing my unease. "The report isn't audio and I won't use your name."

"Okay," I said.

"What do you know about the other number groups?" she asked.

"They have more freedom," I said. "More choice over what they eat. They have bigger rooms. They can get more cream in their coffee. They don't have to run two miles every other day in school." I think the resentment in my voice was showing. Kimi looked nervous to ask the next question.

"Does your mother like living with you, as you bring your family's average number down?"

"Ah," I said uncomfortably. "Did you write these questions?"

She nodded, trying her best not to click her pen. She failed. "That was the assignment."

"I don't live with my mother. Their- my family's- average is somewhere in the 30's. I don't remember. I live with the other 300's. In the 300's building. What else is there? I've never even heard of average numbers."

"Oh," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Is that all?" I asked sharply.

"One more," she said apologetically. "Your number?"

I hesitated. "Officially, 351. But the paperwork is going through. I'm finally going to be a one- the clock was slow."

"That's going to push all the numbers up one," she realized.

"Yes," I said. "So?"

"I'm going to be 300," she said, her eyes growing wide. Now I noticed- her hair was in braids. Anything but a ponytail wasn't allowed for 300's. Her coffee was so pale it must have two things of cream. Her cell was in her pocket, and by the look of things it probably never left.

She took her electronic planner out and switched settings. I didn't know what she was doing.

"Kimi?" I asked. She showed me her planner. It had the rules flashing across the screen. Despite her dream of being a lawyer, she had never thought to read them closely before.

"This means I go to the 300's building," she said, her eyes brimming with tears. "By what you said, I don't get to live with my parents anymore. I was going to- going to become a lawyer. Fight against the-" I clicked the recording device off as she said, "against the ranking system, against assigned- partners." I comforted her awkwardly.

My life was beginning to have hope. Her life just lost it all. I felt like a criminal. "Can I borrow your cell?" I said.

"That's illegal," she said, wiping away her tears just to have more flood down.

I snatched it from her pocket and, after figuring out how it worked, dialed a familiar number. It beeped several times before my mother picked up. "Kimi?" she asked, unsure of who Kimi was but reading the ID that flashed up on her phone.

"Madelyn," I corrected. "I can't be a 1. It changes too much for other people."

"I already got the story to the press," she said. "You're going to be a 1, don't change your mind now. You have your whole life ahead of you now."

"Then I'll go to the press too," I said. It seemed obvious to me. I had grown up, made peace with my number. I didn't want to destroy these people's lives. "Call it off. Please."

She hung up.

"Kimi," I said. "You're drawing attention. Get up." Bewildered, she stuffed her papers and planner into her bag. "We're going to the press."

She followed me as we walked briskly to the news building, leaving our bikes at the cafe for now. "I'm here about a story," I said. "Madelyn Rose."

"The switched number? Yes, we called your line," the receptionist said. "Can we interview you?"

"Call off the story," I begged.

"We can't," she said. "It's such big news."

"Then interview me," I said. "Kimi, you can leave."

"No."

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"15 years ago, you were registered as a 351."

"Yes."

"But you were actually born first in the new year."

"Yes."

"How did that make you feel?"

"Bad."

"Bad? Why?"

"Everyone else grew up thinking they would be something, whatever it was. They had- rank benefits. Now everyone's worse off."

"You can't do anything about it."

"I'm a 351. I'll stay a 351. I won't press charges against the hospital and I won't change to a 1. If someone claims to do these things in my name, they're a fraud."

"This is a very selfless thing you're doing."

"I'm only being a decent person."

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Twenty-three years later a Ms K. Larson strikes down the system.

