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AP Language and Composition

Dr. Gingrich

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*Hawthorne*

Nowhere

 Never in his lifetime did Justin Nixon even consider moving. He has lived in the big city ever since he was born. For the first seventeen years of his life he has had the same schools, the same friends, and the comfort of being used to his surroundings: an ironic serenity within the hustle and bustle of the city.

 His father’s work brought him and his family to the rural town of Hawthorne. Despite the desolate and soundless milieu looming over the town, it was once a hub for early American pioneers in the eighteenth century – at least that’s what Justin read at his previous school, which seemed incredibly pragmatic. The six hour drive took Justin and his father from the city to the suburbs, from the suburbs to the national reserve forests, from the forests to the countryside, and from the countryside to absolute nowhere. Nowhere took him to the historic dilapidation known as Hawthorne. It was a grain of sand on the beach. It consisted of one main street, a run-down Kroger, one church with a funeral home, an old movie theater, and a closed-down fire department. It really was a ghost town.

 “Dad, this town doesn’t even have a *fire department*.”

 “Listen, Justin, the last mortician was ninety two years old. I was asked to take over here and the bonus for moving here is huge.”

 “That doesn’t mean that we have to isolate ourselves from society. It’s 2014, dad.”

 Mr. Nixon sighed. “I’m only doing the best for you.” The gaze in his eyes brightened. “Look. Over there’s your school”

 It didn’t look like a school at all. Maybe more like a prison. It was a large, insipid, grey mass lodged in a dirt ground. No bit of greenery, architectural inspiration, or even a football stadium. The only ambience the school property gave was in the granite sign at the entrance. On it in bold cutouts was “Hawthorne Heights Secondary School. Established 1911.” Thankfully, Justin thought, he only had to spend one year there – one augmented, colorless year.

 Their house wasn’t in much better shape either. Apparently it was one of the best properties in Hawthorne. It even had *cable*. “This,” the realtor stated proudly, “is *the* best property you can get here. The historical value is well worth it as well.” She certainly had absolutely nothing good to say about the house, except for the fact that it once was owned by one of the Hawthorne Mayors. That, and it had cable.

 “Where do you live around here?” Mr. Nixon asked. He was hoping to meet someone to take place of his previous city neighbors.

 “Oh goodness!” said the realtor. His hope was short lived. “I live two hours away in the Abington Township.” She paused for a minute. “Do you know what time it is?”

 Justin, like any good teenager, kept his phone in hand, “Ten past six, ma’am.”

 She immediately became frantic, but suppressed it under her professionalism. She most definitely did not want to waste time. “Well now,” she said, “ the house is closed – all yours! Congratulations on your *new* home!” You have to admit, she really was trying. “115 9th Street! Good luck, and welcome to Hawthorne!”

 She was gone in a minute. Justin and his father were left, with no surprise, alone in their stuffy, old house. At least it wasn’t as dull as the dark and rainy weather outside.

 Justin finished unpacking his belongings. He and his father didn’t bring much, making an allowance for 115 9th Street’s size, but here were three things Justin couldn’t live without, however, and those were his guitar, his skateboard, and a family photograph. It was getting late, it was still raining (even harder than earlier), and the next day would be Monday. Monday means school. But Justin didn’t go to bed right away – actually, he couldn’t. Instead he watched the shadows of leafless branches outside his window dancing on the wall. Maybe these were his old friends from the city talking to him. A sense of serenity became amalgamated with disorientated thoughts of obscurity. And with that, he fell into an unearthly sleep.

Sleepy Sidewalks and Hazy Hallways

 Instead of waking up to his alarm clock he was startled by what sounded like someone knocking outside his window. He assumed that it was the trees that make the shadow on his wall, but still he got out of his bed to investigate what alerted him. Slowly he crept to the window. Every creak in the hoary wooden floor sent forth the loudest shrills as he walked across his room. He got to the window, and with great trepidation and vigilance he glanced outside.

To his surprise he found no one. Just a silent, still house engulfed in a blanket of fog sleeping right next to him. The sky was clear, however, and dawn was approaching. After inspecting outside his window for a few moments, Justin was once again startled – this time by his alarm clock. He ambled over to his nightstand over the creaks that then sounded like the whisper of a mouse. He threw on some jeans, his favorite grey pullover, and went out into the kitchen. It looked identical from the previous night, despite the few plates and boxes that riddled the countertop and floor. On the kitchen counter was a note. It was from his father:

*Hi son. Went to grocery store. There’s a peanut butter sandwich in the fridge. Good luck at school! Dad.*

Justin stuffed the sandwich in his bag, grabbed his skateboard, and went off. He still had an hour before school, so he decided to scope out his new town, or lack of. He stepped outside to a foggy, sleepy street. To his left and right there were small houses, similar to his home at 115 9th Street: old, worn-down, and tiny. Despite the street’s drab appeal, it gave a vibe of curiosity that motivated Justin to travel onward.

Up close it gave a stronger impression of a ghost town. Many of the houses were empty. Nine houses occupied Justin’s street; five of which were abandoned, two had tattered real-estate signs, and five looked like they were occupied: a couple were across the street and one was to his direct right – the same house he could see from his bedroom window. The modicum of trees that dominated the street alluded to the town’s age once again. What was even more surprising, however, is that there were no cars on the street, and no people.

 He continued onto the main stretch of the town, Hawthorne Avenue, where he was thankful to see a car passing by. Justin came across something else that brought him back to society, an elderly man out for a stroll. He chuckled with relief, knowing that there was at least *someone* out in about.

When he arrived at the school it looked even more oppressive and dull than it did in the car. The dingy, damaged walls loomed over him at the door. The door shrieked with the creak of an old hinge, and inside he found himself inside a large empty room. Dust and cobwebs littered the atrium. He was completely lost. Ahead of him were two foyer entrances that lead to hallways too obscure to see. No one was around, and Justin began to consider that this whole town was a scam.

“Welcome to Hawthorne Heights!” It was a lively voice. Justin jumped and to his surprise there was a man behind him. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Justin. I’m Dr. Gingrich.”

Justin still was baffled. A *real* person! “Um, good morning, sir. I’m new- ” Justin paused for a minute. “How do you know me?”

Dr. Gingrich gave a small laugh, “Don’t worry, I’ve been expecting you! Your father – Mr. Nixon, is it? – communicated with me a few days ago! I hope your time here with us at Hawthorne Heights will be a great one!”

“Thank you, sir.” Justin was relieved to know that there was some type of civilization in Hawthorne. He knew that this would be the opportunity to hopefully meet new people. He deeply missed his friends back in the city. “Can I get my schedule?”

The man’s demeanor changed. He almost seemed shocked. “Oh we don’t have a schedule here. I’m your teacher.”

“For what?”

“Everything. Math. Science. English. History.”

Justin was bewildered. “You teach *everything*?”

“With delight! I’m the only teacher here at Hawthorne Heights!”

“Who’s the principal here?”

“I am.”

Justin was at a loss for words. How could one person teach an entire high school every single subject and be the head administrator. Something didn’t add up.

“Follow me, Justin. I’ll show you to the classroom.” Dr. Gingrich led Justin down the left hallway. “All the resources you need will be down this hallway, the North Wing. Nobody is allowed down the South Wing.”

“Why not?” It was an acceptable question.

“Oh there are some problems with asbestos over there. With the small population we have in Hawthorne we don’t have the opportunity to get maintenance on our building.” It was an acceptable answer.

The very end of the hallway had a single door. That would become Justin’s classroom.

A Classroom Full of No One

 Inside the classroom there were fifteen desks facing a chalkboard. There were no windows and the lights were somewhat dim. The only sources of ambiance in the room were a world map and a bookshelf. One other thing, something that concerned Justin even more, was that eleven of the desks were empty.

Two boys. Two girls. They were all staring at Justin with wide eyes, almost like they had never seen another teenager before. After ten seconds of absolute silence between the teenagers, the four in the desks started whispering to each other.

Dr. Gingrich’s voice became delighted and powerful. “Everyone,” he said, “I am pleased to introduce to you a new student. This is Justin. He’ll be joining us this year.” Dr. Gingrich paused his introduction; the four teenagers resumed their gossiping. “Go ahead and take a seat please, in the front row if you don’t mind.” Justin took the seat closest to the bookshelf.

“Now, students, I know it’s been a while since we’ve done this, but how about we introduce ourselves to Justin? We’ll give our name, age, and a few facts that,” the teacher paused to create emphasis, “we would *want* for our new peer to know. Let’s start with Rafael.”

The person farthest from Justin stood up. He was short, but very athletic in posture. Something that stood out about this kid was that his hair was stark white, and his eyes, against his hair, were black like ebony. In a monotonous manner he made his introduction: “Hi, I’m Rafael, but I guess you can call me Rafi if you want. I’m sixteen. I like to run and take naps.” He seemed very uninterested in himself, for he kept pausing to collect his thoughts and instead spent most of his energy studying his new peer.

“Thank you, Rafael,” Dr. Gingrich said. “Who’s next?”

This time it was the girl to Rafi’s right. She was the smallest of them all. She wore glasses and wore her hair in a long braid down her back. “Hello.” Even her voice was tiny and squeaky. “My name is Fennel and I’m thirteen. I like artsy things. I make dolls for my family in my free time. I even make them dresses!”

“Very nice contribution, Fennel! Thank you for sharing.” He turned to the student to Fennel’s right. “Mack?”

Another boy stood. He was incredibly tall, almost awkwardly. “I’m Mack, as he said.” His demeanor was very shy, which was ironic to his deep voice. “I’m seventeen and I’m Fennel’s brother.” He immediately sat back down

“Would you like to share anything else?” Dr. Gingrich was trying to coax him into talking.

“Um…” He gave it a lot of thought. “ I like to read about chemistry.”

“Wonderful! Maybe you can help Justin catch up with us in science!”

“No, thank you.” Mack wasn’t swayed out of his reticence.

Dr. Gingrich didn’t flinch at that remark. Justin assumed that Mack’s shyness was a permanent trait. “Lastly,” Dr. Gingrich said, “who is last?”

It was another girl. Unlike the other students, she looked normal. Her hair was black, her eyes green, and she was average in height. She stood up and looked straight at Justin. “I’m Nina. I’m seventeen and I play guitar. I also skateboard sometimes, but yeah. Nice to meet you.” She forced a smile.

Justin didn’t show it, but he was jumping off the walls! *She’s just like me!*  He thought. *She’s normal too! Finally some normalcy!*

“A final thank you to you, Nina. Justin, would you like to share now?”

As much as he didn’t want to, Justin got up. *Well if I’m going to get friends*, he thought to himself, *I need to do something about it.*  “Hi guys. My name is Justin and I moved from the city. I like American Rock; I skateboard and play the guitar too.”

 Nina looked at Justin and smiled. Justin didn’t realize it but he was smiling too. At least he knew that he had a friend, even if it were a girl. But the moment got interrupted before the two could talk. “Thank you Justin! And again, welcome to our school. We’re all here for you as friends, peers, and as a teacher.” Dr. Gingrich’s friendly attitude became professional. “Let’s continue with yesterday’s geometry lesson. Take out your notebooks!”

Different Society

 For seven hours Justin listened to Dr. Gingrich go on from basic trigonometry to photosynthesis and from Alexander Graham Bell to grammar. He learned all of this his freshman year. It was excruciatingly boring. Boring, dull, and dark. He could barely focus because of the dust agitating his allergies, and whenever he asked a question the four strange teenagers stared at him in amazement. When they were paying attention, all they did was stare and take a couple of notes.

Thankfully, the lessons passed by and it was three in the afternoon. “Great job today” Said Dr. Gingrich with much relief. “Don’t forget to study, and before you leave please come get a copy of *Dracula*.” Count Dracula: A refined count, one with a suave and polite personality, with a dark secret. Justin read the Bram Stoker classic his junior year. At least this was *one* Gothic story without high school lovers and teenage drama. He grabbed his copy last and left the room.

Despite the similarly dusty corridor, Justin was relieved to be out of the claustrophobic classroom. He noticed that Nina, the normal girl, was walking next to him. She was cute, he thought, but it was too early to blurt that out.

“I’ve already read this book.” He said to Nina. “It’s a classic.”

“Oh really? I’ve never heard of it. What’s it about?”

He didn’t want to spoil it for her. “A lawyer from England goes to Transylvania to do business with a mysterious count – a suave, polite one – but the lawyer find that this count, Count Dracula, has a dark and bloody secret.” He laughed. “I hope I didn’t spoil it!”

His laugh echoed through the empty halls. It didn’t belong in the building. The positive energy echoed in dissonance, a cacophony that whispered in his ear like a snake. But still, he kept his conversation with the girl.

“No, I’m still lost.” She laughed too, bringing the same dissonance, but it wasn’t forced. “So you’re not from here? Why’d you move here?”

“My dad’s work.”

She stopped abruptly in the middle of the atrium. Quietly she said, “Why?” Something in her voice was off and she barely moved her mouth. “What does he do?”

“He’s working with the church. He’s a mortician.” He paused for a moment. “Sorry, this is probably not the best way to start a conversation with anyone. Trust me, I know it’s weird.”

“So,” she murmured, “he’s affiliated with someone here?”

“Yeah, he got a huge bonus for coming here. I don’t mean to be rude, but there aren’t a lot of people here who need… morticians. Apparently this is the only church for miles in every direction.”

“But we don’t have a lot of people come to the church. Only for funerals, really. So your dad, he’s with the church?”

“That’s right. He’s never done anything else. My dad comes from a long line of funeral home owners.”

Her expression lifted, and she became much more relaxed. “Oh that makes sense! Sorry, I was confused. I don’t talk to a lot of people.”

The two teenagers resumed walking. “It doesn’t seem like you get the opportunity to do that here, no offense.” Justin didn’t want to sound mean, but make a point.

“None taken.” She smiled at Justin, who opened the door to the outside.

Justin could breathe again. He was out of that insipid institution, but his eyes were sensitive to the light after being in the dark for quite some time. Everything outside, however, was exactly the same besides the fog. It was chilly, cloudy, and dull. The sky had no blue to it. Only shades of grey painted the environment. He continued walking alongside Nina on the side of the street. The two of them were the only one’s out. Even with Nina’s company, Justin still felt like a guppy in the Pacific Ocean.

Justin couldn’t help himself. “Nina please tell me, where is everybody? Does anyone live in this town?”

“Many.” This didn’t make any sense to Justin. When she noticed that her answer wouldn’t suffice, she gave an explanation. “Justin – Justin, right?” He gave a nod. “Well Justin, we, the people of Hawthorne, live in a *different* society. Things are different here to outsiders like you. I wouldn’t know any difference because I’ve been here all my life. But don’t question it, whatever you do. People here get uneasy when outsiders question us.” She continued to walk and collected her thoughts. “And,” her voice became quiet, “just between me and you – because I think you’re a really great guy and I want to be friends with you – just hear me out for a minute. But you have to promise not to tell.”

“Sure.”

“Please just don’t go out after dark. Just don’t.”

“Why?”

She became distressed. “You see! That’s what you can’t say to anyone! Take it from me, okay. Weird things go on in this town at night, I don’t know for sure what it is but I don’t want you to get tangled in its mess.” Justin was confused. What did she mean by weird things? What could possibly happen in a ghost town like this?

Ghosts.

“Okay, I’ll take your word for it. Thanks for not wanting me to get killed.”

The two continued down Skyway Avenue in silence. It began to rain. It began to pour, actually. Justin started to move faster, but Nina wasn’t fazed. She looked exhausted. Pretty, but exhausted. “Wait.” She said. “You said you play the guitar too?”

Justin waited for her and slowed to her pace. “I do. I’ve played since I was five.”

“Can I get your number, if you have a cell phone?” Of course he had a cell phone. She said it as if cell phones were worth ten thousand dollars. “We can talk about music.”

“Okay.” *This is awesome!* He thought. “Why don’t you come over to my house and we can have a jam session together!”

She looked very disappointed. “My parents won’t let me. They’re very strict, especially about new neighbors. Sorry.” The rain turned into a thunderstorm. This time they both began to run.

*Dang it.* “Oh don’t worry about it! I’ll get to see you at school! I’ll see you tomorrow, this is my street.”

“Mine too!” She was excited, and so was Justin. “I’m right here! See you tomorrow!”

Nina was Justin Nixon’s next-door neighbor.

Famished and Betrayed

 Justin was home. His father was there too. “Welcome home son! How was your first day?” His father was overly enthusiactic.

“It was different. It’s a very small class. Very, *very* small, and the curriculum sucks. The school sucks. Even the handful of kids in the class sucks.”

“What about that cute little girl you were walking with?” His father chuckled.

“Oh, that’s Nina.” He felt awful. How could he forget about her? “She’s the only normal one. Well, the most normal. But she talked to me. We both like music.”

“Well that’s great to hear! Good job for your first day!” He chuckled again, this time tyring to be funny – trying and failing. The thunder shook the house.

“I’m going to get to my homework.”

Justin went to his room. He spent a few minutes working on math problems, and then sped through the first half of *Dracula*. The thunderstorm outside added to the dark tone of the book, and a dark aura loomed over Justin’s head that became real as darkness set into the sky. Justin started to wander off into his imagination. He pretended that he was Jonathan Harker, and that Hawthorne was really the Dracula Mansion without the opulence.

Justin went to bed around ten at night. The strange day exhausted him, but before he could shut his eyes he looked at his wall to see his friends swaying in the moonlight. The branches were gone. He jumped up, fighting against the supernatural shrieks in the floor. With trepidation he arrived at the window. Directly across from him was another window with an entity staring at him – its penetrating eyes piercing Justin’s soul. He became weak and fell to his knees. It was Nina – or was it?

Just as he fell his father came into his room. “Justin you *need* to get out of here!” He had a gun in his hand and a bulletproof vest on. “Take the car and get out now!” Just then the front door made a noise. Knock, knock, knock.

“Dad,” Justin was baffled, “what the heck is going on?” Knock. Knock.

“I was assigned to investigate this place.” Then the walls were knocking. Knock, knock. Knock.

“Wait, no, Dad – you’re a mortician.” Knock, knock, knock. Knock, knock, knock! Knock!

The front door thrust open. It was the four strange kids he saw in school. Were they kids? One by one they walked in slowly, too slowly. They were all smiling at Justin. Their bright white teeth blinded Justin, because their teeth had fangs.

They were all vampires.

“Mr. Nixon handed Justin a gun, “I’ll hold them off. The FBI is on the way here, slip out your window.”

“But Dad-”
 “Just go, son. Now!”

Without a heartbeat to spare Justin opened his window and leaped out. He ran. He ran faster than he ever had. *What is this place?* He thought. *What am I doing here?* He looked back to his window and saw his father struggling against the three beasts. Then there was silence. Justin wanted to turn back, but his body wouldn’t let him turn around. He soon made it to the street and his behind some shrubbery and watched a bloodcurdling event unfold.

In the street were dozens – maybe hundreds – of them. They were huddled around a fire in the middle of 59th Street yelling and chanting mantras in some supernatural tongue. He knew that they were all out to get him and his father; they might have already got his father. Petrified, Justin stayed under the bushes and watched the vampires perform rituals that sent chills down his spine and fears through his soul that were inexplicable with the human mind. He would have to escape, but how?

Slowly and warily he moved back out of the bush, but as he did his foot hit a twig.

Snap.

It rang through the streets. They all stopped and turned. All of the ebony eyes were staring in his path. He wanted to scream.

“Sorry!” It was a girl’s voice close to him. “It was just me.” *Nina!* Justin was relieved. But, he realized shortly after that that she too was a beast like the others.

“I have to take care of something real quick.” She spoke with a suave darkness that Justin had never heard before. She walked next to the bush. Justin stopped breathing. She then walked behind it. She whispered, “I can sense you, human.” She giggled. The sound of it was pure evil. Justin remembered the gun his father gave him. He didn’t want to use it, but he valued his life and wanted to get back to his father. He cocked his handgun and aimed it at the voice.

There was no girl where he was aiming. He felt chills down his spine, but it was real. He was grabbed by the throat from behind. Justin dropped his gun. It was over for him.

“I thought I could trust you,” the vampire girl whispered.

“I wasn’t a part of this! I didn’t know anything about my father!” He was desperate. “Please, Nina, *please*, let me go!”

She cried, “Excuses!” She lessened her grip on Justin’s throat. She began to stroke the back of his ear. She *smelled* his neck. “Well, now that you say that…”

“You’ll let me go?”

She giggled. “I haven’t eaten all day.” She turned his neck around. He saw her eyes. They were red like glowing blood. She looked straight into his soul, and the horror consumed him.

“I hope you’ve enjoyed your stay at Hawthorne.”