Reality Bytes

Judy peed herself and now there’s a puddle on the floor. Oddly enough, it's blue, as if she just spilled Gatorade in a condensed circle. Everyone saw her and is pointing and laughing. I can see their thought bubbles with Judy's face in them. Her Happiness is going down. Drastically. Great, now she's going to be Embarrassed for two days.

“Courtney-Lauren!” my father’s harsh voice jumps me back into reality. I turn my head from the computer screen and see him looking at me with a scowl. His arms are crossed as he stands in the doorway. “It’s one o’clock in the morning and you have school, what are you doing?”

“I’m sorry, I lost track of time," I say. "I was playing Sims. Michael just got a new job so I was trying to make him befriend everybody.” I know he doesn’t understand what I mean, but maybe it’s better. Maybe he’ll think that the characters I play are actual people. Real people from around the world and not my own little minions to control.

“Go to sleep,” he says turning his back to me and walking away. I guess I should power down; I have been playing for about seven hours. I just don’t see the point in waking up early and going to school, really. Six classes in one day. Always sitting in the front. Sitting at lunch with kids who make fun of me because that’s better than sitting alone. They said the transition from elementary to middle school would be hard, but they never said it would get worse. What did they know anyways? Did they, whoever they are, go to a completely different school than all their friends? Did they have an older brother who refused to be seen with them? I hope not. It’s not a fun life.

I wonder what it'd be like to have a life where you perform each action because some unknown and unseen creature directs you to. Would that be any better? Not having to worry about anything, just letting someone else do the work? I look at the paused screen before me, of Michael in the middle of a conversation with Blake, gaining friendship with her. I click on the three dots in the lower left corner and press settings. I stare at the 'Will Power' option and contemplate. I mean, it's not like I can't go back if something bad happens, I can just quit the game. I hold my breath as I slide the bar to 100% and turn off my screen.

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Sitting in Reading class the next morning, I keep my head low. I feel the wind as papers fly above my head. The prepubescent smell of tweens is prominent as everyone runs around the room, ignoring the instructions on the whiteboard. A crumpled paper lands on my desk and I regret opening it immediately. ‘POODLE!’ is written out in bold sharpie. I crumple it back up and throw it in the trashcan next to me. The teacher says something from behind her desk, made into a fortress by the piles of papers, but no one hears. Or cares. She’s a big woman with little hair. She always wears the same brown vest that looks like someone puked on it. Someone probably did. I avoid eye contact with her. I know if she sees me looking at her she’ll call my name and that’s when the class will get quiet.

“Alright class now flip to page 339 and check your answers," announces Ms. Smoller. "Then we’ll go around the room and say what we got.” She looks over at me as she finishes her words and smiles. I quickly look down. I don’t need the other kids seeing me act like the ‘teacher’s pet.’

The class settles as kids start calling out different numbers. I can feel my face start to burn and my palms start to sweat. I’m not nervous because I did poorly, I’m nervous because I did well. Really well. 100% well. But no one else has, or ever does for that matter. They’re all too busy talking to each other to be highlighting important sentences. Too busy joking around to do any kind of work. I look over at the clock sitting above a bulletin board of ‘Important Reading Tips!’ If only time moved as quickly here as it did in The Sims. Minutes were seconds, Hours were minutes, and I could pause time whenever I wanted. I was in complete control.

The last kid in my row speaks, I’m soon to follow. “10, 10, 10, 10, 10,” I repeat quietly to myself, preparing my voice to speak some of its first words of the day. The kid behind me laughs out his low score and it’s my turn. I got this.

“10.” I say with a croak. An orchestra of groans follows. Mutters of ‘cheater’, ‘nerd’, and the like escape from the lips of my lovely classmates. *Kabuna.* I may be a ‘nerd’, but at least I can express myself better than the trite language they use at me.

The bell rings and it jolts everyone out of their current state as they grab their folders and run for the door, shoving desks in the process. I pick up my notebook and binder covered with doodles and head towards the door. “Good work today, Courtney.” Ms. Smoller walks over towards me and puts her hand on my shoulder looking down at me. “Don’t worry about what the other kids say. Soon you’ll be the boss and they’ll be bowing at your feet.” She attempts a warm smile and I smile back. In Sunset Valley, I already am the boss.

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One un-wanted hour of basketball later, and the the cool breeze of the AC feels foreign on my skin. “POOOOODLE!” I hear a kid shout from down the hallway. I hear laughter erupt from his lackeys and I turn my head to see this *gerbit* has the audacity to comment on my appearance. He should look in the mirror himself, with his flaming red hair and snaggly face. *Right click. Evil. Fight.* I run over to him and jump up. A cloud of smoke erupts with various letters and ampersands popping out. A few seconds later, I brush my hands off as I kick him out of the cloud. It disappears as he gets up and runs away, his hands flailing.

A girl shoves into me and knocks me into life. "Move pet." She laughs and walks to the water fountain. I run into the handicap stall in the locker room and look in the mirror. Of course. My hair looks like it has been to Frankenstein’s wedding and then some. It juts out from all angles and the curls, or what looks like it’s trying to be, are what give rise to the name. I don’t know what kind of poodle looks like this, but they do have the minds of eleven-year-old boys. Not very bright. Whatever. It was almost time to go back to Judy, Michael, and the kids. They were the only ones who cared anyways.

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My heart races as I start to approach my front door. What have the McKinleys been doing all night? Did they eat dinner together? How was Aviary’s Test? As I turn the knob to enter, my brother pushes me out of the way, running to the computer room and throwing his backpack on the blue chair in the living room. “Hello?” I call out. No answer. I walk over to my sister’s room and knock on the closed door. No answer. I knock again.

“What do you want?” she screams at me. I try enter, but it’s locked.

“Do you know where dad is?” I shout through the door.

“No leave me alone.” Music starts to pour through her walls. I don’t bother knocking again, I wouldn’t even get a response the second time around. I look at my watch, 2:46PM. My mom won’t be home for about another three hours. Who knows when my dad will be home. I walk into the kitchen to get something to munch on while I finish what I have left of my homework. I open the fridge and see the basics. Milk, bread, apples, some pickles. *Right click, Gourmet, ‘Ratatouille’.* I sigh to myself. If only.

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As I walk into the computer room, the smell of B.O. and farts becomes more prominent with each step. I see my brother hunched over, intimately staring into his screen as I step into the room and plop on my dad’s torn up black chair. I move the mouse and the screen lights up. I enter my password and the familiar mountain background welcomes me. I hear a groan from behind me as my brother shoves himself back and storms out of the room. His computer is off. I don’t know why he refuses to be in the room with me. It’s not like I’m taking the computer away from him, there are two. I guess he just can’t stand the smell of clean.

I’m nervous as I click ‘The Sims 3’ icon in my taskbar. The moment of truth is finally here. When the screen adjusts to the game’s resolution, my mouth matches my heart as they drop. I only see Michael. That’s it. Not Judy, Blake, Logan or Aviary. They’re all gone. All their Wishes, their Wants, and Needs, just gone. I look at Michael’s Moodlet and see five days of Mourning and seven days of Heartbreak. I pause the game and move my mouse to the top of the screen, scrolling to my backyard where I see four tombstones. They died. They actually died purely because I wasn’t there to protect them. I wasn’t there to tell them right from wrong. I am their creator and I failed them.

All the beds will go un-slept in, the trees will succumb to weeds, nothing will ever be the same. Michael will never be a Rockstar. Judy can't be the Police Chief. The kids won't be on Honor Roll at School or have Slumber Parties together. Judy can't call the family together, their speech bubbles popping over their heads as they ate at the dinner table. Michael has to make dinner for one. He’s all alone.

I look around me, at the faded blue walls, illuminated by the window of the outside door. It’s quiet. The only sound comes from the shaking fan above my head. I turn to see my brother’s empty chair and the silence grows louder. I swivel my chair, back to face the computer. I press the three dots in the bottom left corner and a second window pops up. I hover over the option marked 'Exit' and a box pops up.

‘Would you like to save before exiting?’

I click no.