

the College Backrooms

You are late turning in your homework. The fluorescent lights buzz overhead. Your classmates and professors are already at the Research Symposium Event, and your footsteps are the only human sound in the room. You hear breathing behind a wall, but you must have imagined it. You just had to crunch for finals, so you're low on sleep. It could be a troublesome student, but you don't have time to investigate. You rush to the Symposium before it starts. This is your chance to add to your application for transfer to Level Four.

The middle rooms of the College always convert to Symposium mode after the last day of each quarter, with party decorations like math on the walls and chemistry balloons. On your way through many identical classrooms, you see English on a wall that's too far out to be covered in formulas.

GET EXPEL

The end of the L stretches out too long, like the writer yanked their hand away. You wonder if this is the same student you thought you heard in the wall. Your friend S3-39 passes through the room you're in.

S3-39: Why are you standing there? Oh.

She reads the writing.

S3-39: Let's go. We need to focus on our education or we'll have to stay here.

She drags you to the Symposium. S3-39 is the only friend you made on Level Three, where all the students are constantly in a rush to learn the stuff and get out. No one has time or interest for social interaction or clubs. She started a rocketry club, you showed up, and the club was eventually disbanded from lack of members. They wanted more classrooms available, so there had to be enough education happening in the clubs to be worth giving up the room.

You wish your friends from Level Two were here, but they stayed behind because they couldn't stand academics, so they wouldn't pass into above levels. You hope they'll see the fluorescent light above someday and go to Level Six with you.

You and S3-39 sit on a bench with your professor P3-12 to watch others' presentations. The benches are covered in the IDs of outstanding students and teachers of this level.

P3-12: Did you bring the experiment results, S3-39?

S3-39 takes the papers out of her bag. She was late because she needed to get some last-minute results.

P3-12: I can't wait until my promotion so I can do real research instead of this undergrad stuff. Half my friends stayed students in Level Five so they'd never pass back into Level One. Teaching there is terrible.

P3-12 goes on to complain about the same old stuff until it's your turn to present. For your project, you studied the walls. At last S3-39 proved they were hollow. You report this to the administration, along with the breathing you heard. They advise you to go to the counselor for hallucinations, assuring you the building is perfectly secure.

The counselor is a member of the administration you heard scary stories about in levels One and Two. You've outgrown it, of course, and can tell fact from fiction. The next day, after you have another hallucination, in your own rented room this time, you ask S3-39 to go with you, and she says she also got sent there by the admin later.

The counselor's office is bright and inviting, and you two sit down on a couch opposite the counselor. Elevator music plays from the counselor's phonograph. You've been in an elevator a few times in your life, when visiting open house on other levels.

You: I heard breathing in a wall yesterday, and today I heard some short tapping noise in my room. I've already had a good night's sleep; what's wrong with me?

The counselor responds quickly, like she'd said this a lot before.

Counselor: It takes time to recover from finals stress. I have students in here about it all the time. Let's do some contemplation exercises. Have you studied hard for finals?

You: Very. I barely got any sleep.

S3-39: *nod* Need to get outta here.

Counselor: What are you studying for? What's your dream?

You: Level Six.

S3-39: Level Five at least. I guess Six, since he's going there.

Counselor: *narrows eyes* How about outside of academics?

You: I dunno. Haven't really thought about it.

S3-39: Getting more of a social life I guess. But I especially want to see where the College ends. If it does. *she looks out the window of the closed door at the endless rooms*

The counselor presses a button on her desk, and the bookshelf behind her slides open. A dozen admins crawl out of the walls and seize you and S3-39.

Route 2

You're shopping for textbooks in the mall when the lights go out. Hundreds of flashlights turn on; it's the start of the quarter and everyone needs supplies. The system announces: "Stay calm at all times. This is scheduled maintenance. Please head to the Park if you want more light. *Don't run, and keep your flashlight on.*" If it was scheduled, then why was no one informed?

You exit the mall into the crowded Park, where the skylight shines down from the upper void. The admins harnessed the power of the void to illuminate the inside of the College. The Park is large, so large there is a train and professors and students of the upper levels are still researching it and making maps. It stretches out on one side of the world, while the College rooms occupy the other, equally endless half. The terrain generation causes life to lag whenever exploration parties go out, so they are scheduled between quarters. The last party just came back after discovering an end to the desert. You are on a grassland at the altitude of Level One, which you just transferred from. You are now allowed to take the train with supervision.

The train is full of passengers when you board. Everyone decided to touch grass. An admin checks your ID and you are good to go. The train is a cacophony of voices, some of them slithering and shifty. The disembodied whispering increases when the admin goes through the door to the next wagon. The only lighting today is the windows, and there are passengers all around you, so you don't know who is telling who not to run.

"Did the admins ask you any questions?" whispers S2-3, who you now realize is sitting next to you, with shopping bags left over from the mall. He's been your bully since Level One.

You: No, why?

S2-3: I saw them questioning everybody in the other car, so I switched. They were asking if the passengers knew anyone who wanted to get expelled or something.

Everyone knows expulsion means being thrown into the void. It's only done to the weakest and worst-behaved students.

You: I should've looked before I sat down.

S2-3: I'm going to tell the admins it's you.

You: Beat me to it!

You both stand up and bolt for the other train car. *NO RUNNING IN THE HALLS*, sounds the system. Admins close in to grab you by the elbows and drag you off the train. "Unsafe passengers!" they explain to the public. Everyone in the Park sees and moves out of your way, doing nothing to help you. You try to wriggle free while S2-3 starts sucking up to the admin.

S2-3: You see, he ran first, and I tried to catch him. He's been telling me for months about how much he wants to get expelled...

Admin: You two being friends is not in our records. Expulsion, both of you.

The admin's grip is steel, like the system itself decided admins have to be OP. You kick S2-3 to distract the admin, but it doesn't work.

Admin: Penalty.

There was no hope once the admins suspected you anyway. S2-3 was two admins' son.

You are dragged through the College into a secret room the admins kept locked, where you saw a big hole in the floor with sparkly black void beneath. You have little time to process before you and your bully are thrown in and emerge... from a portal that immediately closes. Humans swarm into the room you're in and tell you you're at the rift between worlds at "Area 51," monitored by the admins of a place called "Nevada." They say few are lucky enough to get expelled from the College dimension.

Route 3

The elevator stops one level above where it should. You'll be late to open house on your son's level. You didn't have time to go early because you were busy grading tests on Level Five. Sometimes students turn in confusing submissions, and you worry about their mental health. This time a language student depicted admins as fire-breathing dragons and himself as a hero with a sword of critical thinking. You are puzzled, but you figure it must be a good thing your student values critical thinking, since that was one of the learning goals in your language class.

Your train of thought is halted when the elevator resumes its descent. Once you're out, you search the level for your son. You can't find him anywhere in the lively crowds. You try his room, which you open with another key the admins gave you. He's not there, only his plush rabbit you made in home-ec class when you were a student.

Was he expelled?! You haven't cried such tears since Grandma's graduation. The admins said she was in a better place now: Level Seven, beyond the firmament, unreachable by elevators.

There's still a chance he just failed one level down. No, there isn't. His room is still here. Your thinking is all jumbled now that you are in panic mode. You fly to the admins' office to interrogate them. Suddenly the language student makes sense.

"He's not expelled," barks the admin you chose as your target. "Don't ask me where he is; we don't keep track."

It takes 8 quarters, but at last you and your son's other parent have mined through your wall with pencils, scissors, everything you could get. You've kept it hidden behind a plethora of academic posters. It's sleep time, fluorescent lights dim. You have free time. No admins expect anything of you at this hour. Perfect for an espionage mission.

You two enter the crevice and break the last thin sheet of wall you left intact for appearances on the admins' side. It's even darker in the wall than out. You turn on a flashlight and point it at the ceiling, where there are thin fluorescent lights. You trip over wires below. Luckily, there is no sound. Your son's other parent looks at the map he made of the level as well as he knows it. He had suspected the walls of being too thick since he was a student in Level Two, but it was confirmed by undergrad research he did with his students in Level Three. This field of study was outside the realm of normality for undergrad, or even grad, you realized upon reflection. He didn't care either way; it wasn't glorious work, but he didn't protest the topic.

You take a turn before you arrive at a dead end where your room ends. This doesn't deter you; you take a swing with a pencil – and it pokes through. Oops. How will you hide this? You two pass through by lifting the paper curtain. These curtains divide the walls around every room, you learn.

After an hour of travel, the curtain leads into a full room. There's nothing else it could be but AdminHQ. It's quite the lounge, with a variety of seats and snacks, and even cafe-only devices like the toaster and blender. You've always wanted to study them, but the admins didn't want the students' or

profs' clumsy hands anywhere near them. Normally you'd start touching and turning over the curiosities, but right now you are focused on your one goal.

You start feeling around the walls and find two curtain doorways. Behind the first one you hear snoring, so you carefully tiptoe away. You two peek in the other room and see no one, so you go in. It's a library of books and papers.

You move your flashlight around and see labels on the shelves. *Admin education. College Rules. Admin rules. Lying Part 1. Lying Part 2. Advanced Lying: Improv.* You can see the titles with the biggest text, like *The Art of Misleading* and *Useful Fallacies*. None of this is what you're looking for. The bottom row contains the papers and is more dusty than other shelves. One of the sections is *Expulsions*.

At the top is a report about an admin's son getting expelled alongside... your own son. You've never really thought about expulsion before now. It never concerned your family, and despite its scary reputation, you figured since the admins were so benevolent, they'd never do anything bad to innocent people. Now you're not so sure. What have they done with your son? The bottom of the page in bold reads: *One of them was an admin's child. Most concerning case since FBS.* What do they mean was?

In hopes of clarification, you flip through the stack until you find a case labeled by letters instead of numbers: FBS. *Student expelled for writing on the walls in Level Three encouraging expulsion. Recent records indicate the student had a long-time struggle with feeling trapped in the College, especially the English class essay about freedom and illusions, Fake Blue Sky.* When you are in the middle of reading the essay, your son's other parent makes an exclamation of shock. You look to your left, where he has a book opened, and an empty space on the shelf *Admin Education*.

Both of you are suddenly grabbed from behind. You turn your head and see an army of admins in pajamas. The fluffy materials surround and restrain you, transporting you to the nearest void entrance, hidden below a trapdoor in AdminHQ. "You're fired," they say, and chuck you into the void.

Route 4

An admin hops off the train to his shift at the Park lumber mill. He's been waiting for it all day as always. The work may be tedious, but it's a break from spying, and an opportunity to roam the Park. The trees are replanted, but it took clearing out half the biome before they figured out how that worked. A semicircle clearing juts into the farther side of the forest. The admin gets straight to work to supply wood for printing homework and exams to distract the troublesome inhabitants of the College. The less free time the students and profs have for exploring, the more free time he has for exploring.

When he's done he enters the mill to tug on the tail of the cow clock. He hears a ka-ching as his session is logged. The tail resumes swinging.

The admin takes a minecart to the snow biome, the opposite side of the recently-explored desert. Anything he finds today will be recorded in the administration, not available to the teacher-student explorers. Let them think they're free. It's his job to create void lag whenever they're out. Terrain generation is a myth.

The biome is lukewarm like the rest, and the unidentified white powder he touches is called snow. He walks through the forest, gathering samples of the needles and bark. Deeper in the forest it starts to get foggy, and the admin considers turning back. That's when he reaches a clearing, which he could get lost in if he walks in more than one direction. He keeps the trees behind him until he sees something of clear color and slips on it. The landing is harsher than the time his son got an F in physics and he kept changing it to an A in the system while other admins kept changing it back. The day his son got expelled was a relief, to be honest. He walks off and around the slippery solid and comes across a structure that looks like half a sphere sticking out of the ground. The entrance is a door in front of short walls and a ceiling that branch off of the structure. This part of the biome hasn't been documented yet,

so he has no idea what's here and whether it's safe, but admins are disposable. They spawn in automatically.

He opens the door to a lukewarm room with a fireplace on the right and a trapdoor in the back. The admin pokes one of his tools into the fire to verify whether temperature works in this biome. It doesn't; the tool is unharmed.

He opens the trapdoor after gathering a sample that seems to match the trees in the biome, and climbs down a similar ladder into a dark room he would've exited immediately if not for the skylight. The huge room is full of pipes, gears, and entire structures. The shadows are long enough that it must be winter quarter here. Many pipes simultaneously let out steam at his arrival. Gears freeze. The only things still moving are the hands on the clock on the biggest building. The admin feels uneasy.

There are no doors, and the clock building has several pipes cramming in through the doorway. The admin has to squeeze through, even though it looked like there was plenty of room for a human. The pipes seem to have expanded to reject his entry. Inside the building he sees a maze of pipes, the biggest one leading down into the floor. He sees slivers of sparkly black void around it. That pipe was very rusty, but also the most isolated, with only a few gears near it. Other pipes clumped together to make way for its personal space.

Wait, what am I thinking? These are pipes, the admin thought.

The grand pipe let out a big puff and then spoke. "I am Grandfather Steampipe. Explain yourself, trespasser."

Route 5

You're doing your homework in the cafe when an admin delivers your coffee. The distraction is welcome, so you observe the sleepy-looking admin shuffle back to her post. The admin is grumpy today, which is unusual. Admins are cheerful and helpful, like sparkly fairies. You turn back to your pixie dust-- oops, coffee. The cup is too big. You're about to go re-order when you see the ID on it is one digit off from yours. S6-145. You stand up and look for someone with such an ID tag.

The student who has it is in a clique of new students from Level 5. You've seen them around, slacking in places like the mall and library, talking about who knows what. They'll learn how things work up here soon enough. It's so easy to fall back into Level 5. They've disrupted your studies before, so you hope they will.

You check the time on the chicken clock. It's time for your study room reservation! You speedwalk to the library, catching side-eyes from admins, but you *must* pass, by whatever methods needed. You bump into a person, and skip the apology when you see their name tag has the letter S. You wouldn't want to get in a *professor's* bad graces.

The study room that took you five extra credits to earn is in the pod closest to the rest of the library. You can still see the Level Five clique through the windows, so you put up the curtains you were awarded for getting the best grade in your chemistry class. You open your psychology textbook from the restricted access section of the library. Learning about people is a privilege for only the best, most intellectual, most mature students. Like you.

Psychology is the most impressive subject; the curriculum consists entirely of wisdom bestowed by the admins themselves. The same evanescent, enigmatic fairies that have always been out of your reach to study. Role models you could never follow in the glittering footsteps of, glowing in the dark of your eternal education. You've never seen an admin read a book. Becoming one is your impossible dream.

When your blissful session is over, a student is at the door with an admin, ready to use force if necessary. Some students don't want to give up their study room even after the reserved time. You beam at the admin and ignore the student, waiting for the door to close behind her. The admin stares blankly at you and it is at this moment that you realize... you have no social skills. You dip your head in reverence and leave before you can embarrass yourself. You need to study for this over break.

Break is the perfect time to resume your real studies. You follow an admin on and off the bus with practiced tiptoes and corner-hiding. Even if one of the forgiving angels did discover you, you're sure they'd pardon your sins after seeing what a dedicated student you were. Unless they knew you already! Your stomach soars at the idea. Being famous with admins for your achievements would be reward enough for all the grind. You trip in your daydream. You look down and see you had followed the admin into a concrete jungle biome, and you tripped over and onto a bush of pipes. You freeze as if to play dead, eyes darting around checking for the admin. He is under an umbrella tree, hiding from the rain.

You follow him into a wire thicket with a circle on the ground labeled SEWER, which he peels off the ground before disappearing below. How do you open the lid without being noticed? Your experience has not covered this scenario, so you have to start using your brain. Math and physics are the first things that come to mind. None of what you memorized is helping you problem-solve in this context.

You hear voices from gaps in the sewer lid. The echo must be strong down there. "I'm so tired," the admin complains. "Because of all these expulsions lately, they make us listen through walls even at night now. I barely get any sleep." No one answers him. Who is he talking to? He continues to vent

>another admin finds the student?

>student gets expelled by finding something they shouldn't by stalking admins over break

> sewer with more pipetown

>songs, cryptic notes

subjects' contents are wrong to keep "learning" forever. knowledge available has real-world applications handwaved to keep students learning theory instead of going out and exploring freedom of press exists here more than you'd expect, except when admin secrets leak out. writing about leaving the space just lands you on the watchlist