

Notice

Sarah Pinsker



Malachi happened to be mowing down by the gates when the mail carrier arrived in her ancient truck. He wasn't supposed to talk to Outsiders until he turned twenty-five, another six years, but he couldn't help trying on the rare occasions an opportunity presented itself.

"Is it true you all—"

Before he could finish his question, she said, "here's your mail," handed him the whole weekly box, and drove away. He'd seen various Aunts and Uncles carry mail to the office before, so he figured he'd do that. The chance of getting punished with extra duty for something done of ignorance was relatively low.

He hunched forward to balance the heavy box on the mower's motor going up the hill, which proved harder than he'd expected. Halfway, his right front wheel hit a gopher hole and he lost his grip on the box, spilling its contents. He stopped the mower, massaging his cramping hand. He hated mowing. Hated the noise and the monotony and the sun and the smell of vegetable-oil diesel. If he had any choice he'd pick baking every shift.

As he scooped white envelopes off the grass, he looked at the names of places he'd only vaguely heard of: Tennessee, Delaware, South Canada. He'd never really thought about where mail came from, beyond the abstract of Not Here. He'd never left the Reliance, and his enlightener, Aunt Leona, said the compound was the only place that mattered.

And then he happened to see his own name, which was odd because he had never in his entire life gotten mail before. The envelope said "THIRD NOTICE," which presumably meant there had been a first and a second.

He sifted through the rest. There was a THIRD NOTICE envelope for Daniel as well, and he knew Daniel had never gotten any mail either. Malachi hesitated, then slipped both into the waistband of his shorts and pulled his shirt over them.

He parked the mower in the machinery barn and carried the box to the office, trying not to look like he was hiding something. It felt like every eye was on him as he passed, though there was no way anyone could see through his black shirt the letters.

"Mail's here," he said to Aunt Leona, raising his voice to accommodate her hearing loss. She nodded and waved him toward the corner without looking away from her computer.

"Thanks, Henry," she said. There wasn't any Henry in his generation, but he didn't bother to correct her. Everyone in the Reliance probably blurred together for a Founding Aunt. He tried to imagine what it must have been like when they first settled here sixty years before, young and

idealistic, “to create a self-sufficient society away from globalism, commercialism and celebrity,” as the founding principles said.

Everyone else from the youth dorm would be out working, so Malachi went back there before pulling the damp envelopes from his waistband. He put the other letter on the small table between his bed and Daniel’s to air out, and sat to examine his own. The return address said “U.S. Transformative Service Corps, Washington, D.C.”

This letter had travelled from a department he’d never heard of, from a country he lived in only in the technical sense, and he had the strangest feeling that if he hadn’t spilled the mail, he never would’ve seen it. Inside, there was a letter, a form, and another slightly smaller envelope with an address printed on it. A slogan on the envelope’s back read “Twenty Years of Reimagining Community and Service.”

Daniel ducked into the room. When they’d moved from the children’s dorm two years before, Daniel had been six inches shorter. His shorts were covered in purple stains, and he rummaged in his drawers for a fresh pair before turning. “What’ve you got there?”

Malachi hesitated, then pointed at the table. “Mail. That one’s for you.”

Daniel arched an eyebrow. He reached for his envelope as Malachi unfolded the letter and read out loud. “Our records show you have not completed your mandatory Transformative Service registration form online, by mail, or by phone. This form must be completed before your 19th birthday. One year of service is compulsory for all United States residents. Documented medical exemptions only. Failure to return the form and complete service will result in the loss of both guaranteed monthly income and Health Assurance.”

There were a lot of terms he didn’t understand: Transformative Service, guaranteed monthly income, Health Assurance.

“Should we tell someone?” Daniel examined the form.

Malachi shook his head. “It says third notice. If they never gave us the first two...”

“You think they kept them from us? Why would they do that?”

“They’ve kept stuff from us before. Have you ever tried asking anything about Outside?”

“Why would I? Outside is dangerous and—”

“—and un-self-sufficient, blah, blah.” Malachi interrupted. “But how do we know that’s true?”

Daniel glanced around uncomfortably. “We’ve been here our entire lives and they’ve never shown me any reason not to trust. I’m going to show mine to Aunt Susanna.”

"Okay, but you only tell her about yours, not mine." Malachi still thought it was a bad idea, though he wasn't sure why.

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Aunt Susanna frowned when she saw the letter. "Where did you get that?"

Daniel answered with a smooth vagueness, as if letters arrived for him every day. "It came in the mail. What is it?"

"A misunderstanding." She waved the question away. "It doesn't apply to you."

"It says mandatory." Malachi didn't want to call attention to himself, but he couldn't help it.

"It's mandatory for everyone Outside, sweetie. Did you get one too?"

He ignored the question. "It doesn't say that. It says medical exceptions only. Maybe he should fill it out."

"Then he'll end up in their system." The Aunt held out her hand. "We'll take care of it for you."

She obviously wasn't going to explain, and she was ignoring that they must already be in the system or they wouldn't have received letters, and now she wasn't going to give Daniel's letter back.

"I told you," Malachi said as they left the Enlightenment.

Daniel shrugged. "It's okay. She said they'll take care of it."

"But we never even figured out what it was."

"It doesn't matter. You should give her yours too."

Malachi nodded, but when he touched the letter in his waistband, he knew he wasn't going to do that. Instead, he waited until everyone was asleep that night and slipped out. The grass was soft under bare feet as he crossed the Circle to the kitchen. It bustled at most hours, but sat empty between dinner dishes and the first baking shift, his favorite rotation. The work was hard, but he liked being up before the others, and the warmth, and the scent of baking bread. If he could ask to do only those shifts, maybe he'd be happier.

His goal was the kitchen office, which held the second of their three telephones. He'd only ever used it once, when Uncle Cameron had started a grease fire and he'd had to call the Reliance emergency services to come with their waterpump backpacks.

Now he glanced around one more time and unfolded the letter. His fingers trembled with the thrill of doing something he knew he shouldn't do, and he misdialed the first time. The second time, a voice answered, and he thought it was a person, but then it said, "press zero to speak with an operator," so he did that.

"U.S. Transformative Service Corps, reimagining service and community. This is Terry speaking. How can I help you?"

"What's 'guaranteed monthly income?'" Malachi asked.

"Every U.S. resident gets a stipend, from the day we're born." If Terry had laughed at him, he would have hung up right then, but they answered as if it were a reasonable question. "The only way you could lose it is if you fail to complete your Transformative Service."

"What if I don't think I've ever gotten it?"

"It goes to your parents until you start your service, unless you're emancipated."

He didn't know what that meant, and he didn't have parents. Just Aunts and Uncles who seemed to be hiding important information.

Hopefully his next question wasn't stupid either. "What's Transformative Service?"

The voice still didn't laugh, but this time they sounded excited. "I love explaining it to people who don't know! It's the coolest thing. You answer questions and tell us the areas where you'd like to be matched—meal delivery, agriculture, home building, citizen journalism, music for seniors, emergency services, respite camps, anything you're interested in—and we'll put you in a community placement. When you complete your service—or if anything happens outside of your control to interrupt it—your stipend and your Health Assurance continue for life."

Malachi didn't know what all those things were. Some of the placements sounded like things he already did, but the feeling that something was off at the Reliance had magnified. They'd kept all of this from him. Something he was supposed to do. Something that was the opposite of self-sufficiency, but not dangerous. Coming together for other people instead of your people didn't seem like such a bad thing; neither did seeing something outside the gates.

"Do you want to register while we're on the phone? I can walk you through it." Part of him wanted to say yes, but what was he saying yes to? Why would he trust government strangers over the people who had raised him? He hung up.

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A week later, he was mowing along the road again and lingered to catch the mail carrier.

"Please," he said. Before she could stop him, he continued, "Is Transformative Service a real thing?"

"Of course. I fought wildfires in California." She gave him a sympathetic look. "Do y'all not buy into that either?"

Malachi shook his head. "We're self-sufficient."

"Are you, though? You wouldn't get your mail if it wasn't for me. You fix your own machinery, but do you make the parts? It's a fantasy of self-sufficiency, kid. Here—take your mail."

She left him holding the box and wondering: were they self-sufficient, or just opting out of something bigger? The envelope said "Twenty Years of Reimagining Community and Service," but the Reliance was sixty. Maybe things had happened Outside since then that were worth knowing. He made his way to the kitchen after midnight with that in mind.

"I'm ready to register," he said when someone answered.

He'd still have to figure out how to leave, but that was a problem for another day. Did Transformative Service refer to the people he'd be helping, or the change in his own life? It was the first big choice he'd ever made for himself, so maybe a little of both.

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Sarah Pinsker is the author of over fifty works of short fiction, including the novelette "Our Lady of the Open Road," winner of the Nebula Award in 2016, and the novel *A Song for a New Day*, winner of the Nebula in 2019. Her novelette "In Joy, Knowing the Abyss Behind" was the Sturgeon Award winner in 2014. Her stories have been translated into Chinese, Spanish, French, and Italian, among other languages, and have been nominated for the Hugo, Locus, Eugie, and World Fantasy Awards. Follow her on Twitter [@SarahPinsker](#) and learn more at sarahpinsker.com.