

The Crack

Author: Megan Beney

Grade: 11

Teacher: Timothy Ryan

School: McCluer North Senior High School, Florissant, MO

“You have eighteen seconds. Ready? Begin.”

A pause.

“What?”

“Thirteen seconds. You really should get going, Mr. Edwards.”

“But what’s going on? What am I supposed to do?”

“You’re quickly running out of time. Your scores will be drastically affected by your current inactivity.”

“What do you mean?”

“Seven seconds.”

Nicholas glanced around the bare white room, his heartbeat pummeling the inside of his chest. The first thing he saw was a yo-yo on a stool, and he rushed over to pick it up. It was yellow with blue and white stripes.

“Time.”

A moment later, he heard frantic scribbling, scratches on a clutched clipboard.

“Hmm . . . The yo-yo . . . an interesting choice . . . shows signs of unwillingness to . . .” The voice trailed off into incoherent mumbling, vague and jumbled utterances. “Thank you, Mr. Edwards. Your scores will be sent to you in three weeks time.”

Dazed, Nicholas stumbled forward, falling onto the door to the lobby for support. Nicholas wanted to leave, to go back to his quarters, but he hesitated before turning the egg-shaped handle. Whirling back to the strange white room, Nicholas noticed a small black fissure on the far wall. When he looked closer, he could see that it was lined with a glowing silvery-purple material whose brightness pulsed like the beating of a heart, giving the crack the appearance of an exposed vein on a skin of flaky white paint. Nicholas blinked – once, twice – and found that he was having trouble drawing his eyes from the little black crevasse. It seemed to have its own gravitational pull, and he took a step toward it, not noticing that its pulsation was shifting to match the rhythm of his heart.

“Mr. Edwards, you can leave now. You’ll have your results in three short weeks,” said the bodiless voice of the intercom.

Shaking his head, Nicholas forced his attention away from the crack on the wall and shoved his way through the door with the egg-shaped handle. Warmth greeted him as he stepped out into the main lobby, and he looked around, inhaling the familiar smells of the seawater fountain and freshly baked oatmeal cookies. Nicholas smiled when he saw the institution’s head secretary waddling towards him, her pleasantly plump mass shifting opposite her footsteps in her hurried efforts to reach him.

“Nicky!” she called, putting a pudgy hand to the side of her bright red lips, the most extravagant feature of her otherwise domestic appearance.

“Nicky,” she repeated as she came to a stop in front of him, putting a hand on his shoulder as she caught her breath, “How *are* you? I heard you took your test today! How did it go?”

Before he could stammer a reply, the secretary took Nicholas by the arm and ushered him over to her desk, which was bare except for a pink, pencil-filled mug and a plate full of cookies. “Take one,” she offered, gesturing to the plate as she sank into her large purple chair, “and then tell me about your day.”

Nicholas shifted his weight from foot to foot, his eyes darting from the edge of the desk, to his shoes, and settling on the plate of cookies. He hesitated, tilting his head in consideration, and then decided to pick one up, hoping that his movement would assure the secretary that he was contemplating, and not ignoring, her question. Nicholas took a bite, his jaw forming a methodical cycle as it moved up and down, and he crinkled his forehead in concentration, trying to recall some memory of the morning’s events. Glimpses of the strange white room flashed into his head, followed by the drone of the instructional voice over the intercom. He remembered that there had been a yo-yo on a stool, but he couldn’t recall why it had been there, why *he* had been there. And there was something about a crack on the far wall . . .

Long moments passed before Nicholas held his breath and swallowed, surprised by the ease at which the food slid down his throat. He glanced up at the secretary, who nodded and smiled encouragingly. When he looked down to take another bite, he noticed that the cookie seemed less tangible, almost opaque in nature. Nicholas shrugged,

deciding to ignore the change, and bit the remainder of the cookie in half. His eyes widened with surprise at the sharp sweetness of the food, and as he was chewing, he saw that the cookie had become an edible sort of harnessed mist. Rolling the food-mush into a ball with his tongue, Nicholas tried to remember the color of the yo-yo. What was it? It had been so nice. Something bright and friendly . . . The whole room had been inviting – warm and well lit . . . But Nicholas felt that he was forgetting something, something important, and he couldn't remember what. There was something strange on the far wall . . . maybe a picture or a mirror . . .

As soon as he swallowed, a dull sense of empty longing filled the pit of Nicholas's stomach, and he put the cookie down on the edge of the desk, unable to eat the final bite.

"What did you think of the cookie, dear? Did you like it?"

Nicholas jumped when he heard the secretary's voice and nodded, bobbling his head up and down, his automatic response in complete opposition to his true opinion.

"Oh, good. I should hope so. You would think a boy would know his own tastes." She smiled again, her straight white teeth gleaming like polished toy soldiers lined up in a row.

Nicholas blinked, pausing to absorb the pleasant woman's words, and then fixed the secretary with an inquisitive stare. "Wait, what do you mean when you say, 'his own tastes'?"

The secretary looked at him, her face the perfect mask of innocent confusion, lines of worry barely creasing her smooth, creamy skin. "Why Nicky, my dear, you made these cookies yourself! Don't you remember?" When Nicholas shook his head, she sighed, rolling up the sleeves of her pink floral cardigan. "I suppose you wouldn't. You did bake some of them a long time ago. Besides, I think that your cookie making memories are some of the things they pull after you take the test. I honestly don't see why it's necessary, making our young people forget their cookie making days. If you ask me, there's too much of a focus on rushing you all through the crack. And now with this ridiculous test . . ." She pursed her lips, shaking her head in sharp disapproval. "But you didn't hear any of that from me now, did you, Nicky?" she added hastily, her eyes darting from side to side as if she were searching for unseen eavesdroppers.

"N-no, of course not, ma'am," Nicholas stuttered, unsure of how else to respond. A sense of uneasiness began tugging at the back of his mind, causing him to shift his weight forward to the balls of his feet. What had she said about a crack? In all of his years at the institution, Nicholas had never noticed any sign of wear or imperfection in the building's smooth surfaces. After a few puzzled moments, he opened his mouth to ask the secretary what she meant, but she must not have noticed. With a wave of her bejeweled hand, she began speaking again, cutting him short.

"In any case," the secretary said, the glittering smile returning to her face, "I'd better go check on the children." She stood up, placing her hands on the barren desk, her thick fingers spread wide for support. "I can't bake the cookies for them, nor would they want me to, I imagine. I had my own cookies as a girl. But I can be there to help them, as I was there to help you, even if you can't remember." She reached across the desk and patted his cheek, her eyes glowing with affection. "Take care, Nicky. You always were one of the best of my brood. Hopefully that won't change, even after they send you through the . . . after you get your test results."

Nicholas watched the secretary as she waddled away, the corners of his mouth tilting upwards. When she was out of sight, he shook his head, trying to remember the years, the days, the *hours* before his test, but all that came to mind were blurred images, whispers and shadows of the past. With a final glance around the lobby, Nicholas nodded, finding strength and purpose in the decisive movement, and picked up the plate of cookies. He must have made them for some reason, even if he could not remember what that reason was, and he felt that he might need them later. Nicholas turned away, hopeful of finding his friends, anxious to learn how their testing had gone. In his haste, he failed to notice the empty space on the desk where the final bite of his first cookie had been laying only moments before.

* * *

"Mr. Edwards, your test results are ready."

Nicholas rose from his hard plastic chair, his backside sore from sitting, waiting, his heartbeat hammering in his chest. He felt as if the eyes of those still waiting to be called forward were boring into him, judging him, and challenging his right to proceed. His footsteps shook as he advanced toward the desk, making him stumble, causing the temperature to rise in his cheeks. The journey seemed interminable, each footfall lasting a lifetime. One step – another – breathe, release – stumble – recover – repeat . . .

By the time Nicholas reached the secretary's desk, his limbs were trembling and sweat streamed down the sides of his flushed face. His stomach churned as if he had swallowed a miniature washing machine, tumbling and tossing its contents, and he found that he could not look the woman in the eye for fear of her detecting some weakness in him. Instead, he clamped his eyes shut, moisture dribbling down the seams of his face. Nicholas hoped that when

he opened them he would be back in his quarters, safe amidst his bed and belongings.

"Mr. Edwards, would you like me to read your results to you, or would you like to read them yourself?"

Nicholas snapped his eyes open, expecting to see the pleasant, plump secretary that had given him the cookies, that had called him "Nicky" and had patted his cheek. He was taken aback when he found a thin, hard-nosed woman sitting in the large purple chair in her place. As his surprise began to wear off, he noticed that the desk was now covered in neat piles of manila folders, each labeled in black ink with a different student's name. The pink, pencil-filled mug had been replaced by a tall, stainless steel basket filled with thick, heavy-looking black and blue ballpoint pens.

The woman behind the desk blinked at him, her eyes magnified by her dark gray horn-rimmed glasses. She sat with her hands folded under her chin, her over-plucked eyebrows raised in expectation.

"Well," the new secretary began, her rigid, unadorned lips wrinkling and flexing like the folds of an accordion, "which would you prefer? You haven't got all day to decide, you know."

Nicholas glanced behind him at the rows of people still waiting to receive their test results, each of them poised and alert as if they were viewing a production of live theater. As he reviewed the faces, images and bits of information flashed into his brain – names, rumors, memories. These were the people with whom he had grown up. If he had somehow failed the test, if something had gone wrong, all of them would know if the secretary were to read the results aloud. He would never be able to look any of them in the eye again.

"I'd like to read the results myself, please," he murmured, refusing to raise his eyes from the floor.

"Alright then," the secretary said as she handed him the manila folder labeled with his name, her already thin mouth pinched tighter in feigned indifference.

Nicholas reached out to receive the folder, almost dropping it as he took the precious cargo in his quavering hands. The performance had reached its climax, and Nicholas felt the audience, his peers, lean forward as a single mass, each member holding his or her breath in pregnant expectation. His head spun, twirling and tilting like a lunatic toy top. Nicholas closed his eyes, knowing that he could not wait for courage to come to him, and tried to clear his thoughts, finding a rhythm in the rising and falling of his chest. After a few long moments, Nicholas slid his fingertips towards the edges of the folder, attempting to distract his mind as his body performed the task that his spirit could not.

"Mr. Edwards," the secretary droned, her nasally voice heavy with impatience, "there are other people waiting to see their scores."

Nicholas's eyelids shot apart, and he fixed the scowling woman with a piercing stare before jerking open the manila folder. He looked inside, unsure of what to expect, and found that there was only one word written on a standard sheet of clean white paper: "Admit."

Relief overwhelmed Nicholas's senses, making him lightheaded and giddy. He had passed, oh heavens, he had passed . . .

"Congratulations," the secretary drawled, "You are free to continue. Please return to Room 34A to complete the examination procedures."

Nicholas took a deep breath, squeezing the air out of his lungs in a slow, regulated hiss before stepping forward. He did his best to walk with confidence, hoping that his footsteps would not reflect his churning nerves. Fighting the urge to run, Nicholas grasped the egg-shaped handle, and pulled the door to the strange white room open, pausing only a moment to glance back at the large, familiar lobby before stepping inside.

As soon as Nicholas pulled the door closed, he knew that the atmosphere of the room had changed, had become more ominous. He looked around, trying to identify the cause of the variance, when he noticed a man dressed in a solid white suit sitting at the end of a long white table, his hands cupped beneath his chin as if he were in deep thought.

The man stood, the ceiling lights gleaming off of his smooth, bald scalp and glittering in the bristles of his stiff white beard. "Hello, Nicholas," he said, his voice like liquid fire, "Do you know why you are here today?"

Nicholas shook his head, his throat tight, making him incapable of speech.

"No? Well, allow me to explain." The man picked up a white ballpoint pen and began twirling it around his index finger like a stunted, staccato helicopter blade. Nicholas felt his insides turn to ice, and he stood there watching him, mesmerized by the movement, wishing that the man would stop, irrational panic growing inside of him.

"You are here because you can no longer be there," the man said, pointing to the door with the egg-shaped handle. "That place is of your past. You must now move forward."

Sudden terror wiped Nicholas's mind clear of all thought, leaving him incapable of forming a response. "No," he finally managed to squeak, his voice scraping his constricted throat.

"No?" the man repeated, stepping out from behind the table, still twirling the ballpoint pen. "'No' is not an option. You must comply. There is no other way."

Nicholas began to tremble. His eyes darted from side to side like angry flies captured inside of small glass jars, searching for some method of escape. In his efforts, his eyes brushed past the far wall, and he gasped when he noticed that the small crack had grown into a prominent fissure that spanned from the floor of the room to its ceiling. Nicholas watched in gross fascination as the inky mass rippled and surged like ebon lava held up by some reversal of gravity, its purple veins now thick, impressive cords. He had forgotten about the crevasse. It had been so small, so unassuming during his testing, but now Nicholas found that he could not pull his attention away from the dark schism. He stared at the onyx substance, its consistency akin to that of blood, as it pumped and pulsated, forming the heartbeat of the institution. Nicholas wondered how he had been blind to it when he first entered the room.

"Yes, it's . . . intriguing, isn't it?" the man crooned, edging nearer, nearer. "Why don't you go take a closer look? Yes, that's right . . ."

It was as if the locks in Nicholas's legs had been released. He stumbled forward, consumed by the desire to be near the strange dark crevasse. When he was only a few feet away, he stopped, caught by the memory of the plate of cookies in his quarters.

"You don't need those anymore, Nicholas," the man whispered as if reading his thoughts, "Go ahead, step through."

Nicholas hesitated, torn between the memory of the cookies and his need to be near the rippling ebony liquid. The man took another step toward him, his face growing dark with angry shadows. "Don't be difficult, now. Go!"

In a sudden burst of energy, Nicholas spun around and hurtled himself toward the door with the egg-shaped handle. He had only taken three strides when the man grappled him from the front, grabbing him by the shoulders, pushing him back to the oppressive fissure. Nicholas tried to break free of the man's grasp, but his strength was too great, and the allure of the schism was too strong. With a final glance toward the door with the egg-shaped handle, Nicholas closed his eyes and fell backward into the iron clutches of the swirling obsidian ooze.