

## The Mosquitoes

By Betty Samples

*What if the legacy of the Great Salt Lake and the entrepreneurial spirit of Northern Utah is toxic air, swarms of pests, steeper wealth gaps, and increasingly worse mental health for citizens? If we don't save the Great Salt Lake - in part by changing how we live and work - life in Northern Utah will suffer greatly.*

Ellie growled and thrust off her headphones, yanking the cord from her laptop. They crashed to the cheap vinyl floor, a painful sound to the ears which had spent so long saving up money to buy them. Irritability flashed instantly to panic. "Please don't be broken..." Ellie turned the headphones over in her hand. They seemed fine. *They've got to still work! Why can't I take care of my own things?*

Ignoring her mother's shout, she hurriedly crouched around them, coughing from her sudden movement.

Pulling out her phone, Ellie began to plug in the headphones. "I can't do anything right," she muttered. She hurriedly opened her music app and tapped the first song, fearing the worst, but was distracted by a buzzing sound.

"Augh you stupid mosquitoes!" Ellie shrieked and flapped her hands around her head frantically. The headphones and her phone made their way back onto the floor. "How are you even inside?" Her complaint was broken by a coughing fit, doubling her over. "Everything smells stupid and minty, and there are *still* mosquitoes!"

Ellie's mother had helped her spray the room with a minty scent, even though it made Ellie's perpetually raw throat sting when she breathed. Her mother had heard somewhere that the smell deters the nasty buzzing bugs. *All she wanted was a quick fix so I'd stop complaining, I'll*

*bet she made up that mint makes mosquitoes go away. I can't focus because of all these bugs in my room.*

When Ellie had complained to her mother about still finding mosquitoes in her room, her mother had dismissed her, saying she was overreacting.

“*Stop scratching the bites,*” Ellie snarked in a nasal tone, imitating her mother while itching at another mosquito bite. It began to bleed. “*Stop making everything a big deal, Ellie.*”

“Ellie! We need to go!” Called her mother’s voice, for the third time. Ellie cringed internally, hating that the neighbors living above them could hear their shouts.

“Fine, I’m coming!” She yelled, dragging herself to her feet and across the room to grab her yard shoes.

“I *hate* working in the alfalfa field,” Ellie grumbled, angrily shoving her feet into the shoes while standing. Another tickle in her throat made her hack.

She stared at the once-white tennis shoes, unwilling to sit down and tie them. *The laces aren't very long, I won't trip...*

“Ellie I’m serious,” her mother bellowed from outside. Her voice seemed to make their building shake. “Get out here now!”

Groaning loudly, Ellie plopped to the ground and began lacing her shoes as fast as she could. She snatched a spray can of bug repellent and formed a thick cloud of safe- but nasty-smelling Deet. Her skin immediately began to tingle. A small cut on her hand began to burn as she jumped to her feet, threw on her free-merchandise Wilkins Dentistry baseball cap, and slammed her door behind her. The skin inside her elbow kept sticking every time she extended her arm. She stomped angrily, but quickly, to the door. The door opened to a cement stairwell out of the basement of the house-cum-apartment she lived in with her parents.

The swarm of mosquitoes immediately outside made her breath hitch. *There are way more than there were yesterday...* One step past the door, and she already felt a bite through her pants. A mosquito brushed against her lashes as she blinked, making her squint. She inhaled in shock, and one went up her nose. While blowing it out, Ellie felt a sudden tickling sensation on her leg and slapped it with a growl. There was nothing there. A mosquito had landed on her arm, though, and another buzzed horridly in her ear.

Her mother was already in the car, and just about to honk the horn by the frustrated look on her face. Ellie wiped her nose with the back of her hand as she walked through a cloud of mosquitoes, waving her hand to ward off the insects. Wiping her nose was a big mistake: she now smelled the intense chemical scent of bug spray as it plastered to her face, momentarily sticking her hand to her nostril.

A fly had gotten stuck to the Deet on her forearm; it struggled helplessly but was unable to free itself with its wing plastered to Ellie's skin.

Ellie held her breath as she stomped across the salty dirt that made up their front lawn. It was like living on another planet: bugs everywhere, cracked and dry earth, the almost metallic scent in the air. Sometimes, Ellie was enviously disbelieving at how green and beautiful other parts of the world were. She would scroll for hours through videos of lush nature and imagine what life would be like with more color. All she ever saw, besides at the alfalfa fields and others like it, was brown. Even the houses were a sad beige from the dust constantly blowing in the wind.

Ellie shook off dreams of living somewhere else and grabbed the car door handle. In the rush she had been in, she had tied her left shoe more tightly than the other. The unevenness was

already making her foot tingle. *This is the worst day ever.* She hurried into the car, once again slamming the door behind her.

The sudden lack of buzzing brought relief like breaking above the surface of the water and finally being able to breathe. Being in the car with her mother was not much of a reprieve in other ways, however. Ellie knew her mother was fuming, and the air inside the car seemed as thick with tension as the outdoors was with insects. The car's interior was also thick with the suffocating scent of bug spray.

Ellie endured a couple of seconds of silence as her mother began backing out of the driveway. An enormous red truck whizzed behind them, making their car shake. Neither paid it any mind: everyone drove fast. Then they both began shouting at the same time.

“You do *not* slam doors that way-”

“I hate you for making me-”

Ellie pursed her lips as her mother gritted her teeth and clenched the steering wheel, knuckles white. A sudden embarrassment at both having lost control over their emotions at the same time cut them off. Ellie's mother backed the car into the street with a jerk. Ellie watched the cement sidewalks, dead lawns, and single-family homes - cut and modified to each fit three families minimum - as they began to move past her. It was the same view and the same fights every morning, a dreaded routine that had been chafing at Ellie and her mother for the past three years.

Worse, there seemed to be no end in sight.

They rode in silence to the alfalfa fields, broken only by loud traffic speeding by and Ellie clearing her throat. Usually, Ellie found the rhythmic passing of houses soothing. Today, however, all she could see were the bugs and think of her misery.

She avoided watching the mosquitoes splattering on the front windshield, but their patter wouldn't leave her alone. *There are just...so many...* She felt sick to her stomach just thinking about going back outside. How many more bites would she have after today's work? Already her limbs, neck, and face were spotted with dozens of the pink, miserably itchy spots. Most she had scraped at until they bled. *I can't go to school looking like this! Everyone will think I'm one of the Relief Center kids whose parents can't afford to take care of them!*

Ellie leaned as far from her mother as possible, trailing her fingers along the minimalist faux leather interior of their family electric sedan. She traced the tree-shaped logo imprinted on the dashboard. Ellie leaned forward and coughed onto the floor. She hated the thought of coughing her germs all over her arms. For the entire summer, Ellie had been coughing. She was having a hard time remembering what it was like to breathe without her raw throat stinging with each inhale.

The ten-minute drive lasted forever. Despite the mosquitoes, fights with her mother, and feeling physically miserable, Ellie still ended up thinking about what had kept her up all of last night. Nothing was worse than losing Bear.

Ellie felt her eyes begin to burn with tears as she remembered being greeted at the door after every long day of school by her brown, wiry-haired dog. Bear would wriggle uncontrollably, wagging his tail like a maniac in excitement to see her, then lick her face as she kneeled down to greet him. Suddenly it didn't matter how much harder everything at school seemed for Ellie than for other students. It didn't matter that the few kids with rich families wouldn't talk to her and it didn't matter that she always had to avoid coming into contact with those relief center kids. Bear made Ellie know that she was special, she was his favorite. He curled up next to her as she worked on homework or ate dinner. He hounded after her to play

fetch with him or to give him belly rubs. He pawed at her until she had to put her phone down and lie in bed, scratching behind his ears, until they both fell asleep.

Ellie bit her lip hard, trying desperately not to cry. *He's not going to be there when I get home ever again.*

Increasingly hard, she knocked her forehead against the window repeatedly. She dug her nails into her biceps.

The image of her beloved Bear, collapsed and completely black with the amount of flies swarming over him, wouldn't leave her mind. Ellie wanted to puke. She wanted to cry. He hadn't welcomed her at the door after school last week. She had run to the shared backyard and over the slight hill then down to the lakebed with its splotchy green puddles.

And there he was. Never to rest his head in her lap and gaze at her with those big brown eyes again. The loss of days playing tug of war, teaching him new tricks, and snuggling together smothered Ellie in a blanket of dread for the future. Ellie wasn't sure how she could manage to keep walking back into her family's apartment, now that Bear wouldn't be there to greet her.

Her teeth broke through the skin of her lip. Ellie barely noticed the salty taste of her blood; everything had been tasteless the past few days. The pinching of her biceps was going to leave scratches. Her foot in the tightly tied shoe had fallen asleep, but Ellie's hands were too busy clenching her arms to retie them. She felt that the sharp pain they caused was keeping her from uncontrollable tears. Ellie angrily kicked the car beneath her, a furiously vain effort to regain sensation in her foot.

Her mother made a growling sound in the back of her throat. She had been driving far over the speed limit, but then again, so did everyone. Though her mother's anger made her accelerate in jerks and make sharp turns, her driving was no more aggressive than that of most

others. *Maybe everyone is having a bad day*, Ellie thought to herself, thinking of hundreds of Ellie's in all the cars, all grieving over their dead dogs. Ellie's insides cringed even further, her heart shriveling like a raisin.

Suddenly, the insects being crushed into the windshield turned the glass completely black. Ellie froze in horror, clenching her arms even tighter. A writhing, disgusting layer of the few bugs that thrived in the heavily sprayed and over-watered Northern Utah lawns seemed to pulsate sickeningly. The car grew dark.

Ellie blinked, and suddenly the car was light again. Insects still splattered the windshield in horrifying quantities, but not nearly enough to create a layer of bugs. *What?* Ellie thought to herself. *Where did they all go?*

Ellie's thoughts were interrupted as she and her mother arrived at the alfalfa field and she remembered the work she would be doing. The tailgating vehicle behind them honked at the slight slowing down Ellie's mother made and barely waited for them to turn into the alfalfa field before speeding along past them, another car mere inches behind. Ellie's mother drove into their regular parking place under the hot sun.

Ellie burst out of the miserable car the moment her mother had completely braked. She slammed the car door behind her, her limbs furiously flailing against the mosquitos. Ellie hastily licked and wiped the blood from her face. She sucked in her bitten lip, not wanting her mother to see.

Her mother paused before getting out. Her head was leaned back, staring at the ceiling. "My little girl has turned into a monster," her mother muttered to herself before exiting the car with a fervor to match Ellie's.

Purposely keeping as far behind her mother as possible, Ellie scuffed her shoes in the dirt and scratched a mosquito bite on her neck before following her mother to get their wrist tablets.

These were kept inside a small blue house before the alfalfa field, and dwarfed by the massive bale barn a dozen yards away. The house was a dusty but modern little structure; next to the bale barn, it stood out like a General Manager working the fryer. The endless suburban neighborhood ringed around the rippling green field, though it was difficult to see the homes on the far end. Despite her bug repellent, she slapped two mosquitoes that had landed on her arms. She twitched constantly in a vain effort to dissuade the bugs from landing on her. An old bite on the bridge of her nose itched furiously, and Ellie began to scratch it.

“Hey!” Her mother barked suddenly. “Stop that scratching! You know that will leave a scar!” She held the door of the small blue house open for Ellie and stood like a sentry holding it open. Ellie felt like a prisoner marching in. She moved in quickly, eager to be away from the mosquitoes for a few minutes, at least. She switched to scratching a bite on her arm and entered the all-too-familiar room. She stumbled as she took her first couple steps inside, due to both the temporary paresthesia in her feet and pure exhaustion.

Ellie hadn't slept the previous night, nor had she slept much the previous week. She had been too cold from the air conditioning but kept envisioning how cold and stiff Bear had been when she'd found him last week. It didn't seem fair for her to be warm when Bear never would be again, and she had refused to get a blanket. She had tried to close the vents, but the sliders were hopelessly stuck in place. She didn't even consider opening the window. There was no way the torn screen would keep any mosquitoes out. She hadn't even been able to close her eyes because each time she did, she would see flies crawling out of Bear's ears, nostrils, and around his eyelids.

So she had huddled in a ball, shivering, and scrolling endlessly on her phone with tears streaming down her face. The endless silence of that night was broken only by her coughs, which grew steadily worse as the night went on.

“Ellie!” Her mother repeated loudly and impatiently, jolting Ellie back to the present. “Did you hear me? Grab your tablet, we don’t have time to waste.”

The inside of the tiny house was bright and neat. Their wrist tablets sat charging on a clean, white table. On a shelf, a small solar-powered device spurted chargers like a fern. A router sat on top of it. *Wifi is the only good thing about this place*, Ellie thought to herself, unhappily. *Well, that and the bathrooms*. The bathrooms were always nice and clean, though Ellie and her mother were the ones who cleaned them. They wouldn’t have if doing so wasn’t part of the job description; they were always rushed to finish their work.

“Why do I have to be here,” Ellie grumbled. This wasn’t the first time she had asked this question. Just yesterday, while sweeping and mopping before they left for home, she had asked the same at least three times.

“You know why,” Her mother growled back. “There is too much work for your father and me. This is how we afford our house.” Ellie’s father drove the alfalfa delivery trucks. She didn’t see him much, he was always getting called in to take out an unexpected delivery. The company they worked for offered last-minute deliveries of premium alfalfa for horses, so he often had to drop everything and go to work.

Ellie did enjoy receiving her \$100 every two weeks, but the thrill didn’t seem as great as it had just a few days ago. *My headphones might already be broken. It took months to save up for them*. Most of her earnings were being put in savings. That was what her mother told her, anyway.

“Why can’t we just move away?” Ellie asked, staring at her wrist tablet with her arms folded. *I am NOT going to put that on.*

“Ellie. Put your wrist tablet on,” her mother commanded. “And grab your work bag.”

“Don’t ignore me, Mom,” Ellie demanded back. “Why do we even - *cough* - live here?!”

Her mother watched as Ellie bent over in a coughing fit.

Ellie’s mom wanted to move just as badly as Ellie. She hated this dry, salty place and their never-present landlord. She and her husband had tried and tried to move, but relocating was expensive and they were constantly stuck trying to make ends meet. “You’re lucky to have a job,” the owner of the alfalfa field had told her when she’d asked about a raise. “Most people have to depend on government help since there’s not much work these days.” She didn’t know much about him, but she did know that with only two official workers, he was making almost 100% of the profits from the alfalfa fields while paying herself and her husband the bare minimum. And the alfalfa didn’t sell cheap, plus they cut a new crop about every month and a half. With everyone desperate for work though, they had no choice. Now she was resigned, albeit increasingly unhappily, to staying put.

*All Ellie does is complain,* Ellie’s mother thought to herself. Her lips tightened as she watched her daughter stumble over to her work bag and tug it onto her shoulders. She bit back multiple remarks, furiously fighting her frustration with her daughter. *We can’t afford food or rent without getting today’s work done! Does she want to end up like the Relief Center families? Why is she having such a hard time understanding how important it is to be responsible?*

Thrusting Ellie’s wristband in her direction and shrugging on her own bag, she held the door for Ellie on their way back outside, her knuckles white as they gripped the door.

Shuddering at the clouds of mosquitoes above the field, Ellie grabbed the tablet and silently followed her mother out. Ellie instinctively avoided getting hit by the door, let loose by her mother a bit too early as normal. She then swung the tablet like a pendulum from the wrist strap as they headed to their first stop, pointedly not putting it on.

Every other step ached. Her left foot in its too-tight shoe kept dipping towards the ground, constantly catching on small furrows. The unevenness of her steps made her muscles ache all over her body as if everything was becoming unaligned. The mosquitoes were, yet again, worse than she had expected. After inhaling one, Ellie clutched her shirt over her nose. *They're in my hair they're in my hair they're in my hair*

Ellie jumped suddenly as her mother whirled around to her, no longer able to contain her fury. Ellie's sudden intake of breath made her cough and bend double in the face of her mother's anger.

"You haven't even turned on your tablet yet! Ellie! Do you *want* us to be evicted to the relief center?" Her mother's hair whirled as she aggressively pointed to the tablet. "Turn it on! Get to work!"

*She needs responsibility drilled into her.* Ellie's mother figured as she turned and stomped off to the robot Refill & Repair Center, a squat square building immediately behind the bale barn. *Nobody likes being responsible, but everyone has to be.* She left Ellie in the middle of the field coughing, still bent over.

Ellie crouched there for a minute waving off mosquitoes and wishing she was anywhere else.

The Relief Center didn't shock Ellie as much as it did her mom, but Ellie still avoided association with the Relief Center kids at her school, such as Amelia and her younger brother

Brock. Ellie vaguely remembered playdates with Amelia and Brock before their parents lost their jobs and the family was forced to relocate to the Relief Center.

Ellie kept as far away as possible from the quiet, dirty siblings. Otherwise, she'd have no chance of the rich kids talking with her. Distant, hazy memories of being excited to go to school and see Amelia and Brock drifted through her mind. *I used to love school*, Ellie thought. *About as much as I loved being with Bear. I sure am growing up.* Fresh tears rolled down Ellie's cheeks.

The sweltering September sun beat down on Ellie's hat. Her sweat had already gotten bits of dirt and even a couple of the miserable mosquitoes stuck on her skin, which she hurriedly swiped off. Her chest ached, her throat burned, she couldn't stop clenching the toes of her left foot, and she was miserably, brutally tired. She tried to hide her face from anyone who might be driving by; she stood only a dozen meters from the edge of the block. Cars sped by, taking the corner far too quickly and barely heeding the stop sign. *I'll bet those rich kids don't have to work in alfalfa fields on the weekend*, she thought miserably.

Ellie walked a dozen steps before remembering to turn on her tablet. While it turned on, revealing a squiggly line logo that drew and redrew itself, Ellie stomped her left foot on the ground and shivered at the mosquitoes. Pins and needles in her foot made her groan in discomfort. She coughed repeatedly, the pain in her throat growing worse the more she coughed.

Once the tablet turned on, Ellie pulled up the tracker and made her way to the nearest yellow alert triangle. The little image, with a black exclamation mark inside it, represented a robot that had malfunctioned. Or needed some sort of fluid refill. Or anything anytime the artificial intelligence coded into the robots encountered some irregularity it couldn't solve on its own, it would completely freeze up and await human assistance.

Artificial intelligence was everywhere. Companies leaped at the chance for cheap, accurate, 24-hour labor. Some of the few jobs left were cheap labor to fix the problems artificial intelligence couldn't fix itself.

At least for the time being.

Which is where Ellie's parents came in. Along with herself, though that wasn't contractual. Ellie wasn't old enough for an official job but without her help, the job wouldn't get done and her parents wouldn't get paid.

Then they would lose the house and have to rely on the government for help. This meant relocation to the Relief Center built into the old mall, just as her mom had said. There was supposed to be a lot of government money going into it, but the families who lived there sure didn't seem happy.

The problem for Ellie's family was that the alfalfa farm job paid just enough to cover their rent, bills, and other recurring payments along with just enough for groceries, but payment was only given for each day on which ALL of the robot errors were fixed. This meant about eight hours of work each day to travel around and repair all the robots over the 100 acres of alfalfa fields, plus last-minute repairs beginning at 6:30 A.M. and lasting as long as necessary to make sure everything was ready to go the next morning.

Ellie waved away the mosquitoes from her screen and began towards one of the two robots within walking distance. She stumbled, coughed, and fought the continuous, losing battle against the mosquitoes. As she tripped over rows of alfalfa, her mother's voice seemed to come out of nowhere:

"Ellie! Watch where you're going! If you destroy the crop it comes out of our paycheck!"

Ellie looked around, startled, but didn't see anyone there.

*Even when she's gone she's still yelling at me...I didn't trip on purpose, Mom!* Ellie thought to herself, tears welling in her eyes.

She coughed while she plodded along. She vainly dodged and swatted mosquitoes. Then she tripped over the robot and sprawled onto the alfalfa plants behind it.

Ellie gave in and collapsed onto the soil, sobbing. *The plants are ruined already anyway.* Her hacking into the ground sent little sprays of the salty, dusty earth.

Then she started thinking of her mother, and what she would say if she saw her lying out in the field.

The tears came harder as Ellie pushed herself to her knees and crawled over to the robot. *Now my stupid ankle hurts too.* She felt at her face and, noticing all sorts of grime stuck to it, set to wiping off her face and brushing back her loose hair.

*Don't waste time!* She chastised herself and then kneeled by the robot.

The blocky mechanical figure had started a refrigerator-white color. It was still plain and blocky but now had been yellowed by months in the sun. Thick, black tubing helped keep its mechanics from becoming damaged. Though the robots automatically were sent inside the Refill & Repair Center on the few rainy days detected during the growing season, they were as weather-proofed as possible. Four sideways "S"-shaped legs had what looked like nail files stuck to the bottom, the blades which helped stabilize and move the robots forward.

With trembling fingers, Ellie clicked on the alert symbol on her tablet screen. A dialog box popped up which detailed the issue, probable causes, and suggested solutions.

"Rear left - *cough* - leg unable to move, check joint for debris..." Ellie read off to herself, coughing while wiping at tears and mosquitoes.

Sure enough, a little stone had gotten jammed inside the joint. It was enveloped in the rubbery black tubing and stretched inside the robot. One tug at the tubing at the rock sprung out and the robot immediately resumed its jerky pace, making Ellie jump back hurriedly.

Ellie took a quick break to cough and swat at a mosquito before moving on. She let out a moan of pain. "Ooh, my ankle!"

She limped towards the other robot. Her tears began to stream down her face again.

The next robot had completely lost a hind leg. It could have made it to the Refill & Repair center, but finding and getting the leg negated the need for the robot to do so. There was a little plug in the leg which could be connected to an outlet right inside of the tubing.

Kneeling by the robot hurt Ellie's ankle tremendously. *The plug is bent*, Ellie thought absently, more focused on the clouds of mosquitoes all around her. She swung her work bag onto the ground and pulled out a pair of pliers. She bent the plug back into place and replaced the leg on the robot. A dozen or so flies alternatively landed on and flew off from the white plastic of the robot. Ellie flinched each time they did so, worried they were mosquitos at first glance.

This time the robot took a second longer to begin moving, but Ellie jumped back regardless. She often had unpleasant visions of the footblades stabbing into her hand. Yesterday, she thought for a second that one of the blades *had* stabbed into her hand, and she shrieked until she realized that her hand was uninjured.

Jumping back was also painful. *This stupid ankle!* Her left foot also had fallen asleep again. She tried stamping out the pins and needles sensation, but doing so caused jolts of pain in her right ankle.

Ellie sobbed.

She stood in the field, miserably shaking with coughs and in fear, utterly unhappy. *I miss Bear. My feet hurt. I hate working. My eyes hurt. I keep getting bitten by these stupid mosquitoes!* Ellie thought, ruminating on this, her worst day ever, and coughing all the while. She felt a pinch on her forehead and slapped her face.

She pulled back her hand and saw a smeared black bug mixed with the red shock of pre-sucked blood.

Furiously crying, Ellie managed to pull herself together. Bitterly, she limped towards the Refill & Repair Center. Each step was painful; first jolts from her ankle, then pins and needles that made her want to collapse into sobs. She constantly needed to cough, and each cough heightened the pain in her dry throat. Mosquitoes turned the air into static all around her.

Before long, Ellie could hear the whirring, clanging, and beeping noises of her mother repairing robots inside the Refill & Repair Center. Ellie stumbled dutifully around the building, trying to look like she wasn't lollygagging in case her mother looked out.

Around the back was the four-wheeler, a red little thing turned patina by the dust and salt. Ellie dragged herself onto it and took off, starting to follow the directions on her phone to glowing alerts about a mile away.

The sudden, thick splattering of mosquitoes all over Ellie as she started driving stopped her cold. The engine rumbled beneath her as she gasped in shock. *I wasn't even going very fast yet!* As Ellie looked down, she saw her clothes and skin peppered with little mosquitoes, a few smashed into her.

Ellie promptly fell off of the four-wheeler and puked. She kneeled in the dirt, sobbing and coughing relentlessly.

*I can't do this.*

Ellie remembered how unbearably exhausted and tired she had been last night. She hadn't thought she could feel worse. Bear's death had taken a toll on not just her, but her parents as well. Her father insisted they all needed a night off - besides making sure the robots at the alfalfa fields and deliveries didn't have any urgent needs, they should go out for ice cream. Something as a family, to be together after losing Bear.

But her father then got a message about an urgent delivery. He left immediately.

"Can we still go, mom?" Ellie had asked, tears beginning to form in her eyes.

Her mother had almost seemed more crushed than Ellie. "I'm too tired, sweetie. Make sure you get all your homework done," she had said before trudging off to her bedroom and closing the door behind her. Ellie, knowing she wouldn't be able to get caught up if she fell behind in her schoolwork, sadly headed into her room and sat before the dreaded blue light of her school laptop.

Ellie lay in the dirt, miserably remembering how late she stayed up working on homework, vainly trying math problems repeatedly and staring at half-written sentences that wouldn't form. She remembered the online scores submitted after she turned them in.

Ellie cried harder, thinking of what her parents would say when they inevitably saw her scores.

Her cough grew suddenly worse as she sobbed, hiding her face from the mosquitoes. She was close to her pile of vomit, but she couldn't focus on much else besides her misery and the mosquitoes.

Vaguely, Ellie heard the sounds of running footsteps coming nearer. "Ellie! What happened?" Her mother cried, hurrying over to crouch by her.

Ellie was coughing much too hard to respond. She felt her mother's hands under her arms, carefully lifting her. "Let me take you home sweetie."

Ellie stumbled to her feet with her mother's help. Sharp pains shot up from her ankle. "Mom," she weakly protested. "We have to finish fixing - cough - the robots."

"I'll come back and finish up."

"What if -" Ellie paused, fighting the painful scratch in her throat. "- I could walk home. So you won't be - cough - gone so long."

"You're obviously sick!" Her mother scolded. "Look at how you're shivering!"

Ellie *was* shivering, and clearly not due to cold weather. The sun was baking the field, it was a particularly hot September weekend. *It's not because I'm sick...*

She'd never trembled from fear before, but she knew she was now. Every mosquito that whizzed by her face sent a tremor of fear. She could feel the pinch of their bites on her skin beneath her shirt and up her pant legs. She kept twitching her arms constantly to keep them off.

Tears suddenly streamed down her face. Ellie kept her head down as she responded to her mother:

"I feel - cough - better now. I can make it home."

Ellie waited tensely for her mother to respond, but after a few moments of silence, she glanced up.

Her mother was staring at Ellie's phone and all the alerts remaining on the screen. Intense deliberation was written all over her face.

*I haven't gotten enough done, Ellie thought to herself with resignation. She's trying to see if it is possible to fix all the field robots and all the Refill & Repair robots, too.*

Ellie's and her mother's eyes met.

“Why are you freaking out about the mosquitoes so much? Is that what this is all about?” her mother asked, suddenly suspicious. “Are you trying to avoid doing your part?”

Ellie stared at her mother, purely baffled. *Neither of us can breathe without inhaling mosquitoes! She has as many bites as I do! How do they not bother her?*

Her mother nodded as if she had found the root of the problem. “You won’t get out of work by pretending to be sick. Go finish fixing the robots.”

Ellie burst into tears. She collapsed weakly, continuing to cough, but her mother had stood and begun brushing the dirt off of her pants. “This fit of yours won’t get you out of working. Start moving.”

Ellie felt a hollowness in her chest. Her body was no less weak, the bugs whizzed around her no less sickeningly, but from somewhere, Ellie found the energy to drag herself to her feet. She got back on the four-wheeler, leaning deeply on the handlebars to support her trembling legs. “You never listen to me,” She growled at her mother in a gravelly voice she barely recognized. “You don’t understand anything.” Turning the key and grabbing the handles was difficult because of her shaky hands, but she drove off before her mother could respond. Her mother turned and headed back to the Refill & Repair with a pounding headache. *Maybe she is starting to understand how important hard work is, her mother thought to herself. If she is sick, then I’ll make it up to her. We just need to finish this work.*

The mosquitoes were no better for Ellie. They peppered her skin most sickeningly, but the threat of leaving a job undone forced her onward.

Driving in a straight line on the paths among the alfalfa fields was much harder for Ellie than it usually was. Mosquitoes clouded her vision, her ankle screamed each time she pressed the gas, and focusing on driving was almost impossible. Ellie kept thinking of Bear, her parents

fighting, and the impossible schoolwork she had ahead of her: a million depressing thoughts. Ellie drove a few feet into the alfalfa plants twice, sharply curving back onto the path and almost jerking her phone out of the vehicle. Bile rose repeatedly, a horrible stinging sensation against her already raw throat.

Finally, she made it to the first cluster of robots. She was about half a mile from where she started. Four of the worn white robots encircled her, each a varying several yards away. Stiffly, Ellie climbed off of the four-wheeler. She kept her arms out slightly, shaking at the spattering of mosquitoes all over her body and trying not to smear them.

“More...mosquitoes...” Ellie croaked, staring at the thick clouds all around her. Tears fell fast as she pulled herself off the four-wheeler, taking a moment to groan at the pain in her ankle, then walked to the nearest robot. Between the tears, the pained ankle, and her left foot, - still asleep! - Ellie stumbled several times.

Another rock was wedged inside of this robot as well. *Why didn't they just make their robots so rocks wouldn't get stuck in them?* Ellie thought with vague anger. Then she sneezed.

It was the most painful sneeze she had ever sneezed in her life.

Slimy mucus burst from both her nose and mouth, splattering all over the front of her shirt. It was peppered with little black mosquitoes.

Ellie screamed.

Her voice broke the near silence of the fields. Her hands flapped uncontrollably, and her knees shook. Every part of her body twitched. In no conceivable future could she imagine such a horrible day as today.

She was a coughing, crying, spasming tornado until, that is, she tripped again.

Ellie sprawled into the dirt, suddenly shocked into silence. She shook her head, lifting slightly to stare right ahead of her. Inches away was a black mound. Ellie blinked and noticed a dark blue feather sticking out of the black. Countless flies, crawling all over the bird in a thick layer. In her terror, Ellie was convinced that the mosquitos were now the least of her worries.

*They are eating the bird. Just like with Bear.*

Ellie screamed louder, feeling a sensation that she was sure was her throat tearing to shreds. She leaped to her feet and bolted for the four-wheeler. Every other step was an awkward agony, almost dropping her to the dirt again. Almost dropping her to the mercy of the killer flies.

Fear propelled her. She dove onto the four-wheeler, vaguely feeling a wave of relief at the weight being taken off of her ankle. Waving faster than ever at the clouds of insects around her, Ellie turned the key and pumped the gas.

The small engine gave several small thumps and fell silent.

“NO!” Ellie screamed painfully, turning the key again.

And again.

*It's broken and the flies are going to kill me,* Ellie internally agonized, thinking desperately enough to match the frenzied movements of her arms around her head: her only defense. And it wasn't enough: a patch of flies appeared on her pant leg and was growing.

Ellie screeched and slapped the splotch of flies, but they reappeared an instant later.

The insect cloud suddenly seemed to grow thicker around her. Her surroundings seemed to flicker with their dark shapes. Terrified, Ellie shrieked again and threw herself off of the four-wheeler.

She ran back the way she came with gangly, uneven strides of absolute terror. Her chest began to burn immediately, but no way was she going to stop. She *knew* a cloud of flies was

following immediately behind her. With every terrified breath, the sharp pain in her sore throat grew worse as she breathed in the toxic air filled with heavy metals, an air that had been getting more polluted with every passing day as the Great Salt Lake near her house dried out. The lakebed contained concentrated heavy metals and breathing them in for so long had permanently damaged Ellie's throat and lungs. Unbeknownst to Ellie, the poor Utah air quality was what had caused the fatal stroke that killed her dog, Bear.

Ellie fell multiple times, and each time masses of flies began to settle on her. She felt multitudes of tiny, painful pinches and was instantly spurred back to her feet by terror-fueled adrenaline. She ran deliriously from the killer flies, a mirage of stress reaching its boiling point.

Ellie's mother straightened from repairing an herbicide spray tube on a robot when she heard her daughter screaming, again, from outside. "What *disaster* is she making up now?" She muttered to herself, at her wit's end. "I thought I'd gotten through to her!" She thrust the tube into place, cleared the Repair Alert for this robot, and stomped out of the Refill & Repair Center.

Behind her, the robot began moving back towards its work in the field with jolting, rhythmic movements, and a slight mechanical hum.

Ellie's mother stepped outside at the perfect time to see Ellie pitch face-first into the ground. She seemed to skid about a meter, mostly stopped by the rows of alfalfa plants. She must have been moving fast. She faintly heard Ellie puking again. Moving towards Ellie with growing concern but still seething with anger, Ellie's mother strode over to her daughter.

Ellie's mother turned a bit to cough into her arm. *Everyone is coughing, these days.* Wait...*what is that wiggling movement by the robot I just fixed?* She suddenly halted, thirty yards away from her shaking, miserable daughter.

There was indeed a little, black, flailing tube hanging out of the robot. A slight stream of liquid squirted from the tube as the robot jerked along.

“No, no, no!” Ellie’s mother repeated to herself and took off running to the robot. *I must not have fixed the hose right? It is spraying herbicide all over the alfalfa! We can’t afford to pay for that many damaged plants!*

She ran to the robot and quickly found the power-off switch. The herbicide hose continued to stream out the acidic liquid, but the flow quickly began to slow, and then stop. Unfortunately, the robot had covered a good ten feet of alfalfa, and this herbicide was extremely concentrated. It was developed to immediately kill the increasingly hardy weeds that popped up among the alfalfa. Once the herbicide filters through the soil, the extremely deep roots of alfalfa plants would still reach it. There would be a dead spot here within the week.

Ellie’s mother immediately snapped her head towards where she last saw Ellie lying crumpled on the ground and shouted: “Look what you did! What is wrong with you? Why can’t you just do your job and stop falling to pieces?” Her face was red with fury, her fists were clenched. The robot stood perfectly still, its herbicide hose lying flat.

Ellie’s mother suddenly froze. Ellie wasn’t there anymore. Panic clenched her heart as she turned to the sound of frantic footsteps, growing dimmer.

By the form of Ellie’s sprinting, there must be something wrong with her ankle. It didn’t seem she could see very well, she stumbled over every step and her path followed a jagged but slight curve. She was reaching the edge of the field, almost to the road alongside it.

The road with very fast traffic, and a lot of it.

“Ellie no!” Her mother howled, breaking into a sprint with her arm outstretched, as if she could keep her daughter from stumbling into the street.

A sleek, black sedan immediately slammed into Ellie.

*Is mom...screaming?* Ellie wondered, barely conscious. There were sirens, many different people yelling, a car alarm was going off, and cars kept whizzing by.

*My legs feel funny...the police are here?* From the waist up, everything hurt with a burning sensation. It was hard to keep her thoughts straight. Mosquitos still buzzed around her. *I need to get to the car... where it's safe ...*

Ellie saw varicolored hazy lights grow dimmer and dimmer. She thought of Bear and how much she missed him. Her vision began to grow dark, and Ellie was sure the darkness was flies beginning to land on her. *They're...eating me alive too...*

Her mother bellowed and snapped at everyone around her. She cast blame and directed emergency workers to move faster, knowing no other way to cope with the growing fear and guilt within. She would keep doing so for hours, burying her denial of what she knew had happened deep down.

There was no way Ellie could have survived being hit and launched so far, the bleeding alone was indicative that it was far too late.

Ellie died.

Flies began to settle on her corpse.