

My name is Will. I'm a Westie. I live in Zone F. My Corporation account is in credit. These are the things I say clearly and quickly to any CSO—Corporation Security Officer—who asks. These are the facts that flash on a screen, whenever I push my wrist against a security scanner: when I get on the bus, when I log on at school or work, and when I go through my front door in the evening. Twenty times a day—at least.

“Will?”

I look up. Sir is frowning at me. “We’re waiting,” he says. I nod, staring at the icons on my screen. I’m nauseated—everyone is. It’s Evaluation Day. But for me, it’s also because of the Crystal 8 withdrawals.

I click on the first icon, *Profile*, and everyone watches my screen projection at the front of the classroom.

Name: Meadows, Will

Sex: Male

Type: Westie

Age: 15

Guardian: Meadows, Jessica

Siblings: 0

Academics: Average

Physical: Below Average

Psychology: Average

Employment: Desalination Plant—Technical

Long-Term Track: Desalination Plant—Technical

“Next screen, please, Will,” Sir says. He’s alright, Sir: he suffers almost as much as we do each Evaluation Day, and you can feel him wishing us all to pass. Not like our teacher last year—that bastard looked ecstatic whenever there was a Corp alert, and he *loved* it when Craig Jacobsen’s screen flashed *Unsatisfactory* and we went into lockdown until the CSOs arrived and took Craig to the Rator. They didn’t even send Craig to the Circle for retraining—just straight to the fucking Rator.

The tension rises as I hover over the second icon: *Units*. Our units are aggregated daily and reported every month on Evaluation Day. But the Corp changes the algorithm each month, so you can never tell for certain whether you’re going to measure up.

“Will?” Sir says again; his tone is anxious.

I click, and quickly scan to the bottom of the screen.

Units invested in Will Meadows by the Corporation to date:

- * Social: 42,687
- * Material: 54,679
- * Education: 19,677

Units returned to the Corporation by Will Meadows to date:

- * Work output: 33,543
- * Education output: 0 (N/A—Westie, Zone F)
- * Genetic output: 0 (N/A—Westie, Zone F)
- * Projected genetic output: 0 (N/A—Westie, Zone F)
- * Projected lifetime debt owed to the Corporation: 480,000
- * Projected rate of pay-off: 12,000/year
- * Projected time to pay off: 40 years

* Projected rate of pay-off: Satisfactory

Overall result: Satisfactory

Satisfactory. Everyone claps. My mind buzzes as Sir smiles at me and then moves on to Sandeep Michaels. I breathe out, relieved. I wasn't really *that* worried, since each month I hustle extra units on the side through the Gray Corps. Hustling Gray units isn't a problem—as Ma says, the Corp usually looks the other way at the Gray economy, because the Corp benefits from it. But you never know if someone has been secretly reporting on you for working too slowly during a shift or cracking a joke about the Corp to the wrong person, which is what happened to Craig.

As Westies, we are allowed to be in a state of increasing debt to the Corp until we turn twelve—then we're expected to return units. Our class started out with half-days at the desalination plant and now we all do four and a half days per week. Our half day of “school” is timetabled for different days each week—it depends on when we're most needed at the plant. On high-demand weeks, they just skip timetabling our school session altogether, which is fine with me. It's not like we're actually getting an education. All we do is go through our history and discuss ways to maximize the units we can give back to our generous Corporation, which has so selflessly protected us.

We've been evaluated every month since we were toddlers. If you're a Westie male, you get sent to a training center as soon as you're toilet trained. The center matches you to a school and future workplace, based on your Zone and test metrics, as well as any units your family is able to give you. If you're very lucky, your parents and grandparents have earned a lot of Legacy units from the Corp to pass down to you. If that happens, you may get sent to a proper school in Zone E; we sure don't have any in Zone F.

For Zone F Westie guys like me, with zero Legacy units, there's nowhere to go. I'm of average intelligence and slightly below average in physical health. If I'm lucky, and I work hard, and keep up my side hustles, I'll get to keep working at the desal plant. Hopefully, in twenty years or so, I'll have saved up enough units to buy a Shadow from the Incubator. Maybe she and I will be one of the 5 percent who have live births, and we'll work our asses off to give a surplus of units to our son. Maybe I could give that kid a chance at a Zone E life in plant management, or even, dare to dream, a semiprofessional job in Zone D.

If I'm unlucky, I'll screw up my units and get sent to the Rator.

For Breeders, of course, things are much worse. They're born into debt that they're not allowed to pay off themselves. But that's another story.