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<div align="center">The Reading Dilemma</div>

Snuggled up under the covers and surrounded by stuffed animals, my brother and I attentively listen as my mom reads us *Blueberries for Sal* by Robert McCloskey. My mom's voice is animated as Sal follows the momma bear, too preoccupied eating blueberries to notice she is following the wrong momma. My brother and I are captivated by the story, even though we have heard it many times before.

Every night, from before I could even read to until I was eleven years old, my parents read me a story before bed. Of course, by the time I was eleven, we had moved on from picture books like *Blueberries for Sal* to young-adult novels like the *Harry Potter* series. Once we finished reading the fifth book of the series, which took us *quite* a long time to finish, I began reading the rest of the series by myself, hinting to my dad that I was growing up and perhaps it was time to end our long-time reading tradition. However, I am forever grateful for our bedtime story ritual because it instilled in me a love of reading. I got my first library card when I barely knew how to read, my name on the back of the card scribbled in child-like letters. On hot summer days, my mom would take me and my siblings to the library, the air-conditioned refuge filled with books I had yet to discover. Right as I entered the library, I would beeline to the shelf with the *Sammy Keyes* mystery novels. Settling down in a comfortable nook, I would read until it was time to leave.

As I grew up, though, I found less and less time to read. In high school, I was so busy with school and extracurriculars, that even when I had some free time to read, I chose to watch TV instead because I was so exhausted. I also got easily discouraged when I read because I was a slow reader, and with that combined with the lack of time to read, it would take me months to finish a book. Part of what makes reading captivating is becoming engrossed in the story, which means you need to read it relatively frequently in order to stay in touch with the characters and the story. I found that I was forgetting the plot and the motives of certain characters because it was taking me so long to finish a book, which incidentally caused me to lose interest in the book. This was a very frustrating time for me. I felt as though I could not call myself a reader anymore.

However, I took advanced English classes in high school that expanded my love for literature and made me realize that I am still a valid reader. In my junior year, I read amazing books like *The Scarlet Letter*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*. My peers were equally as passionate as I about these novels, and their enthusiasm fueled my own in class discussions. The English classroom became a space that allowed me time to fully immerse myself in literature. In addition, the way I understood literature expanded through these classes. I began close-reading and analyzing the diction, tone, and figurative language authors used instead of just reading for plot. When reading *The Scarlet Letter,* I fell in love with the diction Nathaniel Hawthorne used to describe the rambunctious child, Pearl, and the way he captured so much emotion in every page.

Despite this revival in my self-confidence as a reader, I still did not have much time to read in my free time. Becoming a college student certainly did not open up oodles of time for me to read either. Busy with loads of schoolwork and readings for classes, and combined with the stress and exhaustion caused by the pandemic, reading for pleasure was put on the backburner. It

quite honestly took me six months to finish a book this year. Recently, however, I have become more motivated to read, and I have been challenging myself to read more often by setting aside specific times for me to read rather than watch TV. My roommates and I have even done a few "reading parties" where we all gather together in my room, turn on my twinkle lights, and read our respective books for a couple hours.

I have also realized that I am not alone in feeling frustrated or guilty for not reading as much anymore. Whenever I bring up the reading dilemma with my friends, they nearly always say they feel the same. And unfortunately, even full-grown adults like my parents are too busy to read. It seems as though the way our society is structured to be heavily work-focused leaves us with hardly any time to read for fun. In general, Americans prioritize work over everything else in life. Our jobs are often a source of stress due to long work hours, concern of not earning enough money, or complicated work assignments. Most of the time, my parents come home exhausted after a long day of work and would rather spend their evenings doing more "mindless" activities like watching TV. The jobs that many adults have leave them with no mental capacity for pleasure reading.

In my ideal American society, I would completely restructure our work and school systems. People would not need to work such long hours in order to earn money necessary to survive. In addition, there would be longer and more frequent breaks throughout the day. I think that if employers really valued their employees, they would enact these measures to alleviate stress and therefore increase the productivity of their employees. As a result, people would have more time to not only read for fun, but participate in activities and hobbies that make them happy.

It is so important that our society continues to encourage reading and the telling of stories. Stories tell us how to relate with one another, how to see things from other people's perspectives, and they show us the beauty of language. Without stories, humans would be lost. So, like my parents did for me, I will carry on the bedtime reading tradition.