

The Orb

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Image 1. Twelve-year-old Margie has to get through a scary tradition. Illustration by: Martin Wikstrom/Cricket Media

Margie Callahan stood before the Orb, her mother on one side, First Minister Chao on the other. The metal walls gleamed like ice, and everything smelled vaguely of sanitizer. She'd been inside the shiny, silver room before, on a tour with her class when schooling had only just begun, but this was different. This was real.

"Mom, do I really have to go?" The first minister pressed her tortoiseshell glasses up her nose with one long finger and glanced at Margie's mom before looking back down and giving Margie a tight smile. "Everyone goes, Margie. You know that. I did when I was your age. So did your mother."

Mom's fingers — callused from years of assembling standardized furnishings for schools and child-care centers — trembled in Margie's grasp. "She knows."

"There are others waiting their turn," the first minister said, her lips smiling but an edge of impatience coloring her voice. Every child who had turned 12 in the past month would face the Orb that day. Margie bit the inside of her cheek. Her mom was scared but was trying to put on a brave front. She could manage at least as much.

"I'm ready."

Her mother exhaled quietly, slipped her hand out of Margie's and gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze.

First Minister Chao pressed her palm against a sensor on the Orb's surface. Rainbow light pulsed to life within, swirling behind the plexiglass door so that purple, blue and green slid like an oil slick over the first minister's shiny dark hair and glasses. A low hum shook the floor. Margie swallowed convulsively.

"You remembered the rules? You didn't bring anything with you?"

Margie shook her head and hoped nobody could hear her heart pounding. She didn't want to answer the question out loud, because it would be a lie. The ceremonial jumpsuit they'd given her had no pockets, but she'd tucked one small item in the band of her underwear: her father's watch. The one thing he'd left behind just for her. He'd made it in his workshop with his own hands, with both their names engraved on the underside. She hadn't taken it off since the day he'd died. Not until that morning, when her mother made her do it.

Margie had cried, even though at 12 she was too old for tears, but her mother had insisted, not leaving the changing room until the watch lay like a dead thing on the counter. Her father always told Margie that he'd help her be strong — all she had to do was keep the watch with her always. When her mother had stepped out to let her finish changing in private, the almost inaudible ticking proved too much of a temptation.

Margie had dried her tears and put on the jumper, the watch tucked away where no one would think to look. Her mother had checked her wrist to be sure she hadn't put it back on again and been satisfied. One little watch couldn't make a difference to the Orb, could it? It was powerful enough to know a person's destiny. Surely it wouldn't be swayed by such a small thing.

The first minister knelt down, meeting her eye to eye. "This is the most important day of your life, Margie. You're going to learn who you're meant to be." Her expression hardened. "Now, you've heard that sometimes people don't come back out. Those are people with evil in their hearts. People destined to commit the worst of crimes. The Orb prevents those crimes from happening. But you're a good girl, right? So there's nothing to be afraid of."

The weight of her lie pressed down on Margie's breastbone, making it hard to breathe. Was she really a good girl? A good girl wouldn't break the rules. But the steady, almost imperceptible tick-tick-tick against her belly was the only thing making her brave enough to keep from running.

She nodded and tried to smile.

First Minister Chao squeezed her hand, then rose and touched a button on the Orb's side. The plexiglass door lifted. The hum intensified, vibrating under Margie's bare feet. Dancing waves of color washed through the door, turning her white jumpsuit from orange to gold to green. An earthy, damp scent wafted over her.

"Go on," said the first minister. Margie forced herself to take a step. Another. One more step and she entered the Orb. The ground was cold and gave way underfoot, as if she were stepping on molded gelatin. She hesitated, but a soft hiss warned her the door was closing, and she took the last step that brought her fully within.

The door sealed with a thud and Margie spun around to look back, but the plexiglass was opaque from the inside. She could see nothing. She pushed against the wall. "Mom!"

Her voice vanished quickly, consumed by the Orb. Unlike the exterior with its shiny metal walls, the interior of the Orb felt almost like fabric. The rainbow colors pulsed to a loud heartbeat thrum — da-dum, da-dum.

Margie pressed her palms against her ears and squeezed her eyes shut. It dimmed the sound enough that she could turn her attention instead to the tick-tick-tick of her father's watch she sensed against her skin. Focusing on the watch's rhythm, Margie cautiously opened her eyes.

The Orb was bigger on the inside than it should have been, with rounded hallways, which had not been visible on the outside, branching off in all directions. The colors began to coalesce, turning one pathway red, another blue, and on through the spectrum.

Margie inched toward the yellow pathway. Ahead, she heard the sound of a young woman's laughter. Her own? Was she supposed to follow it?

The blue pathway smelled of the sea. She'd visited it once with her parents when her father was still alive. A good, happy memory.

A shriek echoed down a crimson pathway, followed by the sound of running feet. Margie flinched away. And behind it all, the heartbeat thrum. Her own heart stuttered, as if trying to match the pulse, but Margie focused again on the watch. Her heart was her own. She wouldn't let it be overwritten.

More pathways branched from the original six, colors melting into a multitude of hues, and from each pathway, a different sound, a different feeling. Some called to her so loudly she nearly followed without thinking, but the watch anchored her in place, fighting the hypnotic heartbeat. How long did she have? Was there time to think? What if she chose the path for those who weren't good girls? Any path could be the wrong one, and who was to say that any of them was right? Her mother, for all her good work in the assembly room, never seemed truly happy. Not the way her father had been.

The laughter down the yellow pathway was tempting, and so was the sea. But why did she have to choose now? Why not wait until she had a better idea of who she was?

Margie sank to her knees and closed her eyes, concentrating only on the watch's rhythm. Slowly, everything else faded away. No more laughter. No more heartbeat. No more sea. Only the tick-tick-tick and the rhythm of her own breathing. She hardly noticed when the plexiglass door slid open, opening her eyes only when First Minister Chao touched her shoulder. "Margie?"

The colors were gone, leaving the Orb a strangely bare white. "Yes?"

The first minister gave her a real smile, the kind that crinkled the corners of her eyes. "Your mother was right. There's a lot of your father in you." She offered Margie her hand and helped her to her feet.

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" She stepped out of the Orb and her mother raced toward her, gathering her into an embrace. "Oh, baby girl, that is the best thing. I'm so proud of you."

Margie blinked, her cheek pressed against her mother's ribs. "I don't understand."

"It means you'll be your own person, Margie," the first minister replied. "Now, if your mother doesn't mind, I need to take you for a short exit processing."

Margie detached herself from her mother's arms and followed the first minister into a small office just down the hall. When the door closed, the first minister rested one hand on the mahogany desk and turned her deep black eyes on Margie. "What was it you brought with you?"

"I—" Margie stammered. "I don't understand."

"Yes, you do," the first minister replied, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "The Orb couldn't make the choice for you, but nobody can resist the Orb without help. Only the bravest break the rule. Like your father, and like me."

Margie bit her lip and looked down at her feet. "My father's watch. Before he died, he made me promise to have it with me always."

"Your father was a good man. His innovations have helped shape the future. He'd have been proud of you, Margie Callahan. I am. The world is a better place when we can make it for ourselves. You will have that chance."

"So I'm a good girl?"

"Better," said the first minister. "You're a strong girl. But you must never tell anyone what you did. Do you understand? Not even your mother."

Margie nodded, though she wasn't so sure. If her mother had been able to choose her own path, would she be happier today?

"The Orb is the glue that holds our society together. Everyone trusts its judgment. If they were to begin to doubt it, can you imagine the chaos that would follow?"

Margie nodded again. "I understand, First Minister."

She would keep the secret, at least until the time she could really understand, one way or the other. The tick-tick-tick of her father's watch would count the hours, months and years. And when she was older, when she'd learned what there was to know, then she would decide. Because she was her own person. No one could tell her no.



Quiz

- 1 Which answer BEST explains how the setting affects Margie?
- (A) The setting instills doubt about the Orb's judgment.
 - (B) The setting introduces tension about what Margie's future will be.
 - (C) The setting creates stress in Margie's relationship with her mother.
 - (D) The setting causes sadness regarding Margie's memories of her father.

- 2 Read the list of sentences from the story.

1. *He'd made it in his workshop with his own hands, with both their names engraved on the underside. She hadn't taken it off since the day he'd died.*
2. *But the steady, almost imperceptible tick-tick-tick against her belly was the only thing making her brave enough to keep from running.*
3. *"Your mother was right. There's a lot of your father in you."*
4. *"Your father was a good man. His innovations have helped shape the future. He'd have been proud of you, Margie Callahan."*

Which two sentences taken together provide the BEST evidence to support the idea that Margie finds strength in remembering her father?

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 1 and 3
- (C) 2 and 4
- (D) 3 and 4

- 3 Read the two selections from the story.

1. *Her mother had checked her wrist to be sure she hadn't put it back on again, and been satisfied.*
2. *Her mother, for all her good work in the assembly room, never seemed truly happy.*

Which of the following inferences can the reader make, based on these selections?

- (A) Margie's mother is jealous of Margie's relationship with her father.
- (B) Margie's mother wants Margie to work with her in the assembly room.
- (C) Margie's mother values following the rules, but it does not make her happy.
- (D) Margie's mother has always wanted a different job, but she is too afraid to ask for one.

- 4 Which answer BEST describes how Margie responds to the first minister's command to keep her experience in the Orb a secret?

- (A) Margie is afraid of the first minister, so she decides to follow the first minister's command.
- (B) Margie is strong, so she will make her own choice about whether to follow the first minister's command.
- (C) Margie is worried about protecting her mother, so she agrees to follow the first minister's command.
- (D) Margie is uncertain about her future, so she doesn't know whether she can follow the first minister's command.