

When You Wake

Mai-Anh Nguyen

First Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2023 Young Writers' Contest

Oakland Mills High School—Columbia, MD

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“Nadine!”

“Yes, Dr. Clay?” came the calm response. Nadine was Dr. Clay’s most valuable and most trusted assistant, graced with the incredible ability to remain calm no matter how stressful the circumstances.

She was also, of course, a robot.

Dr. Clay did not reply immediately. He was entirely engrossed by the person who lay before him, and he fussed and prodded endlessly while poor Nadine awaited instruction. The woman on the bed did not stir, no matter how hard Dr. Clay poked or how urgent his pleading became. “Please, wake, I beg you,” murmured the doctor, but his patient did not indulge him with an answer.

“Dr. Clay, the patient currently is not capable of doing so. Her internal conditions aren’t stable enough,” put in Nadine helpfully.

The doctor’s head snapped up. “Yes, of course. Administer the regular dose and check the machines.” He patted the robot fondly on the forehead, or where a forehead should be. Nadine’s head consisted of a blank faceplate that hid a tangle of wires and technology Dr. Clay did not entirely understand. Yes, he had crafted her, but the robot had become a sort of creature of her own, one that understood human emotion without feeling it herself.

Nadine accepted the affectionate gesture and went to do as the doctor had requested. Had she been human, she might have argued against giving the patient yet another dose, considering that the last one had not been so long ago. But she was only a robot, and her creator was not to be defied.

Dr. Clay sighed, turning away and removing his glasses. For the first time that night, he looked around the familiar hospital room they were in; all white and clean corners. The hall outside was blurred, grayish. The doctor squinted, trying to guess how late the night had grown. Was anyone else awake?

The thought left as quickly as it came, his mind coming back to the present situation. Dr. Clay reached up to massage his temples, and realized with a start that his hands were wrinkled and dry. He rubbed them together. Perhaps it was just the cold weather, he hoped.

Maybe he was just getting old. At the thought alone he felt a pinch between his eyes and at the back of his head, as if he were wearing a pair of too-tight swimming goggles. The doctor liked swimming. Well, he *had* liked swimming as a boy, but it had been many years since he had ever gone. When this was all over, maybe he’d go. If he had the time. And the energy.

Who was he kidding? He’d never go swimming again. Not with this wrinkled, mottled skin, this white beard (it had been gray not so long ago), and this body that seemed to lag a few seconds behind his mind. Simply put, he was deteriorating. It was sleepless nights such as this one that stole his years away. The doctor was not young, not anymore, but he was not as old as his appearance might suggest.

How many times, thought the doctor, how many times must I live through this endless night?

“Dr. Clay,” called Nadine. Her voice had been programmed to be soothing and feminine, but it still held a tinniness that the doctor had never managed to get rid of.

The doctor turned back to face the bed and his assistant. The robot stood, unnaturally still, among the many wires that strapped from the patient’s prone body to the humming machine that maintained stable conditions within the patient. The noise had become so familiar that he rarely noticed it. Now, it was the loudest thing in the room.

Nadine went on, “The patient’s heart rate is slowing.”

At that, Dr. Clay felt his own heart jump. “No,” he breathed.

“Yes,” said the robot. Her tone did not fluctuate in the way a human would. Her fingers, which each had three sections and individual ball joints with an incredible range of motion, laid clasped in front of her. Awaiting instruction.

It was that one simple word that sprang the doctor into action. He reached down, pressing two fingers just under the woman’s jaw, not wanting to believe Nadine’s words. He waited for a second, and then another. A faint pulse murmured, but just barely. It was as Nadine had said; his patient’s heart was slowing, and it was approaching zero.

“No, no, no,” Dr. Clay muttered to himself. He snatched a defibrillator off a cart of medical tools. In his haste, the cart toppled over, sending blades and syringes of all sorts flying across the floor. He paid the mess no mind.

He watched the monitor for the woman’s heart rate. It was still decreasing, and the woman was still dying. With shaking hands, he placed the device on the woman’s chest. The doctor was not a religious man—no, he had long ago stopped believing in any kind of God—but now he called for someone, anyone to answer this prayer.

He had done this countless times, saved countless lives. So why was this scene playing out like this? Dr. Clay squeezed his eyes shut. The author of his life’s drama certainly had something against him.

With a click, the defibrillator activated, sending a shock into the woman’s chest. Dr. Clay and Nadine watched, neither breathing.

Nothing happened.

“Nadine,” Dr. Clay whispered, gaze fixed to the heart rate monitor. “Check the device.

There’s something—why isn’t it working? It has to work, *it has to work!*”

But Nadine made no move to do as her creator had instructed. She acknowledged his distress, acknowledged his pain, acknowledged that he was not quite in his right mind right now. She *understood*.

But she did not feel it herself.

One metal finger pointed to the monitor. The shock had been administered, but the patient’s heart was unable to retain a steady rhythm. Now, the monitor showed only a flat line. “I’m sorry, doctor, but there is nothing we can do. It is possible that the defibrillator is somehow faulty, but it is more likely that the patient was simply too far gone. She has been dying for a very long time.”

An inhuman noise escaped the doctor’s throat. He knew that. He always has. But he had done everything in his power, everything he could think of, to save this woman. When will it ever be enough?

Dr. Clay’s own breath quickened as he stared down at the still form of his patient. A clear mask had been strapped to her face, helping her breathe while she was unconscious. She wouldn’t be needing it now. He removed it with trembling fingers, revealing a face sallow and sunken with disease. The doctor reached out and brushed back a strand of hair from the woman’s face. He let himself smile.

This will be the last look he got at his daughter.

Miraculously, terribly, her eyes opened. Breath swelled in her chest and her mouth opened in a yawn, as if she were only waking from a deep slumber. She turned to look at him, and with a sweet smile, she only said, “Father.”

The young woman never did receive a reply, for it was then that Dr. Clay knew that this heavily encrypted truth was unraveling.

The last thing the doctor sees before he is wrenched violently from the scene is the face of his daughter, as lovely as she was in life.

The first thing the doctor sees as he wakes is the blank faceplate of Nadine, as steely as she always is. He is in his room, by himself except for the robot.

“Doctor?” Nadine stares expectantly, a VR headset in her hands.

Dr. Clay rubs his eyes with a hand with a groan. On his nightstand is a photograph of a young woman he knows well, and the sight of it sends a ringing ache to his heart. He tears his gaze away. Nadine must’ve ripped the goggles from his head when the illusion started to crumble.

“Yes, Nadine. You may restart the simulation.”

Little Birdie

Feiyang Shen

Second Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2023 Young Writers' Contest

Dulaney High School—Timonium, MD

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Snip. The pair of scissors barely manage to avoid grazing my earlobe, guided by old and shaky hands. I knew it was silly to be sentimental over something that was nothing more than an inconvenience, but I quietly mourned each lost strand as my mother worked.

Another dark clump flutters down to the floor. I didn't have much hair to begin with, but just enough for the wind to whip it into the gears of the left wing two days ago, clogging up the contraption and sending me plummeting into poisoned soil. The fall had twisted my ankle. I was lucky to get off with so little, but one of the jetpack's blasters got crumpled.

Admiral Callum had ordered for the removal of my hair as engineers rushed to fix it. I had dawdled, using the fixing of the jetpack as an excuse to delay. Until now.

"All done," my mother says. My hand immediately reaches up to run itself over my scalp. I could feel every individual chunk, every crooked chop. She sighs. "I'm sorry Wren. You should've asked Miss Fran to cut it. That woman's the only one who knows her way around some scissors around here."

She says that as if Miss Fran hadn't suffocated in her sleep two weeks ago when her air purifier broke. I had told her myself, but she doesn't remember; her 45th birthday was coming up sometime this year, and her memory was starting to deteriorate at her elderly age.

"No, it's okay. I wanted you to do it." She smiles. I pat her on her wrinkly hand.

We sweep up the bits of hair around our feet. Our movements are matching in their slow deliberateness: her muscles have long been weakened by both pollution and malnutrition alike; I just want to savor every moment with her before the mission.

I'm dumping the scraps when the door to the decontamination chamber opens. The tall figure unlatches the connector piece between his helmet and bodysuit, allowing the clean air in the compound to seep between the crack. He yanks the helmet off and takes in a deep breath.

"The Admiral wanted to see Wren," Jay announces. He is younger than me by a mere three years, but he has the childish maturity of someone much younger. He wrinkles his nose when he sees me. "I can't believe you got uglier."

I dust my hands off before reaching out to scrub the top of his head with my knuckles. He yelps. "No wonder the Admiral didn't select you. If the sky-people saw you coming, they would've shot you down immediately."

"They wouldn't," Jay retorts, slapping my hand away and sticking up his nose. "I would know how to maneuver those wings so fast, those fancy stuck-up rich people wouldn't—"

"Jay," Mother interrupts tiredly, "Your sister is doing a great job as the chosen one, yes? Now, what did Admiral Callum need from her?"

Jay shrugs. Flops onto the couch. He doesn't even remove the rest of his gear, and I could only hope that he decontaminated it properly. "He just said it was important. I dunno."

"Useless little gremlin," I snip at him, but I'm already anxiously reaching for my oxygen helmet and boots.

"Goodbye!" My mother calls as the door to the decontamination chamber closes behind me.

The process of gearing up usually takes a grueling twenty minutes. It takes even longer than usual today because I have to pull my left boot on, inch by inch, grimacing with every painful drag of the plastic

over my injured ankle. I can hear muffled conversation through the door of the decontamination chamber as I pull on my jacket, facemask, and goggles, my mother's voice quiet against my brother's brashness.

I am doing this for them.

The New York Settlement is hovering a bit to the west when I leave our compound's building, nearly eclipsing the sun and casting great shadows somewhere in the distant wastelands. It's one of the largest sky-settlements in North America, the very first long-term one engineered to house people away from the nuclear fallout and pollution. When it took thousands of people up, it left millions down on Earth.

Soon, I will fly up to make contact with the people within its pretentious aluminum casing, and I will beg them for help.

The Admiral's always said that if we didn't have our pride, we'd have nothing. The thought of begging should make my stomach twist, but I've never internalized those lessons the others have; I don't care anymore, because if we don't get help, we'll have nothing in the end regardless.

My mother deserved to breathe air that was fresh and see a real bird before she passed away. My brother could still be saved before the waste saps away his strength.

The ground squelches beneath my boots with every step. The nearby river had flooded a week ago, turning the soil into a poisonous purple with its decades-old sewage. I had touched it with a bare hand then, out of foolish curiosity, and the slurry fizzed and popped on my skin until it turned red.

I've never seen it so bad.

I glance up at New York once more and rehearse my lines in my head. I'd look into its inhabitants' bright eyes, into clear skin and rich clothes and expressions of abject horror, and I'd say *hello, I am Wren of the ground people. Please save us.*

I press the button to the building of the base of operations. The doors slide open with a *whrrr*, revealing Mika, the Admiral's aide, who informs me about my tardiness and watches with a careful eye as I shed my outermost gear to wipe down the garments underneath. Finally, when he decides that I'm safe to enter, he opens the inner door of the contamination chamber with a *woosh* to allow me access.

Even though it's the biggest structure, there are only two small hallways, so it is mere seconds before I find myself standing in front of the Admiral's door.

"Come in," the person inside calls at my first knock.

Admiral Callum was perhaps a distinguished and powerful man several years ago, but I've always known him as the man he is now: this old, intense-eyed wisp of a soldier who was too stubborn to die.

"I thought I sent your brother to fetch you two hours ago," the Admiral says, tapping his three remaining fingers on the handle of his wheelchair. He doesn't wear gloves or any other safety equipment. He doesn't need to, when he doesn't ever leave the building. His body can't take it. "Did the haircut take that long?"

"Sorry," I grimace. "You know how Jay always finds some way to keep himself busy. He might've found something to hunt."

"Of course," the Admiral hums, smiling. He pauses to hack out a cough before continuing. "I'm always impressed by the fighter's spirit in that boy. He's already become a very valuable member of the community at his young age."

"Yes. My mother and I are really proud of him."

"And your mother and brother should be very proud of you as well."

Being selected for the mission was a shock. I didn't think he would choose me over my brother—I've always thought he liked him better—but I was honored nonetheless. It was a relief too; I'm too scrawny to help around much. I was worried I was becoming a burden.

A proposition sits on the tip of my tongue. "I was thinking about it," I admit shyly. "I could become an ambassador of sorts, I think. I could fly up and have meetings with the sky-people and we could work together to solve our problems."

Admiral Callum tilts his head. His smile grows more stilted. I wonder if I had gotten too far ahead of myself when his posture relaxes again. "Of course. Although, I would find it quite difficult to negotiate with those sky-people."

"I understand, sir, but you can count on me."

"Very good," the Admiral says, and I well up with pride. Then he leans forward in his seat, stormy eyes skewering me in place. "Wren, I am going to be upfront with you. There's been a change in plans."

I sit up straighter. "How so?"

"New York is moving west. If we don't act soon, it would become riskier and riskier for you to fly up and reach the settlement without losing power in your engine."

I swallow. "How soon?"

The door opens. The engineer walks in, carrying a bundle in his hand. He presses the button and it unfurls, metallic feathers stretching out, tips brushing the walls on both sides of the room. The wings are modeled after a bird's; less graceful, but good for balance nonetheless. Each piece, like everything else we have, is mismatched and scavenged from fragments of sky-cities. A rainbow of silvers and bronzes shine whenever the light hits its smooth surface.

There was a new engine replacing the one I broke—dented and rusted over—but an engine nonetheless. I was grateful that it was fixed so quickly.

"Our scavengers found it broken off from a smaller settlement down south," Admiral Callum explains. Another coughing fit overtakes him. I've heard from my mother that he hasn't been doing too well in the last couple weeks. "New York will be gone by tomorrow, so we need to move now. Do you understand?"

"What about my ankle?" Then I immediately felt selfish. "No, don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

He smiles at me. "Excellent."

The engineer silently retracts the wings and fits them over my back. The heavy weight of them and the jetpack makes me stumble backwards. There's an odd, solemn look on his face when he ties the straps of the jetpack around my waist as the Admiral observes in the back. Something new is attached to it: a metal box with a protruding wire. A tinier metal box with a button on it is at its end.

After I'm sufficiently geared up, Admiral Callum speaks. "Tell her about the button." The engineer stays silent.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"I've added a new...tool," he whispers after a pregnant pause. I was holding my breath in his stead; no one ever disobeyed direct orders from the Admiral. "Press the button when you get close to the settlement." Then he leaves without permission, head lowered and back hunched.

"Ignore his attitude," Admiral Callum says, waving his hand. "Are you ready to go, Wren?" I shift from one foot to the other uneasily. "Can't I say goodbye to my mother and Jay first?" The Admiral taps his stopwatch with one of his three fingers. "You can do it later."

The original plan allotted me a week of practice with the wings before the mission. I had only managed to practice a little on the first day before my fall, so I felt wholly unprepared as I stood on the shoddily made launch pad, staring down into the purple-red landscape. It was only me and my metal wings; no one else knew I would be flying so early. Privately, I had hoped Admiral Callum would've had Mika call my family, but Mika was nowhere to be seen when I left.

I wait for a few moments before I feel a breeze ruffle what's left of my hair. Then I held my breath, jumped, and pulled the cord to start the engine.

The blast shoots me up further than I remembered. The wind whisks my scream away and then whips and lashes my face, an unkind reminder for me to release my wings. When I do, the current catches onto their feathers as the sun catches onto their sheen. I feel like I'm on fire. I feel aglow.

I open my mouth to laugh in delight. Even though the air is cold and harsh in my mouth, I couldn't stop from grinning wildly. I was free as a bird.

I've refused to look down, keeping my eyes on New York instead, watching as it grew closer and closer. I pull on my wings to guide myself towards the chunk of metal, heart in my throat. I was almost there, I could nearly make out each individual metallic panel, each propeller keeping the city afloat. I could see an aircraft landing zone. I was almost disappointed; I didn't want to stop flying.

Just as my feet touch the ground, the engine starts to sputter. They had calculated the perfect amount of fuel it would take for me to make it up here, to this desolate white land. The hard soles of my boots thud against the metal ground as I walk cautiously to the nearest window, peering inside, heart vibrating out of my ribcage.

A woman stands in a corridor. She had the same build as me, same brown hair, same slight slouch in her posture. She looked nothing like me. She was pretty. I didn't know humans could be so pretty.

The woman looks up. We make eye contact. She glances at my helmet, my goggles, my thick outer jacket and heavy boots, my unwieldy metal wings. Her mouth opens in a scream.

No, I mouth. Please don't be afraid. I am Wren of the ground people. Please help me. Her face contorts further in fear until she looks like the monster she thought I was. I'm scrambling for anything to make her stop when I suddenly remember the button the Admiral had given me.

* * *

"Mika, please."

"Sir, you can't go outside. You'll die."

"I went with the plan."

"You *what?*"

"It'll happen any moment now."

"I—You promised her father you'd take care of her!"

"He'd understand."

"You keep telling yourself that."

"The amount of debris that will fall would sustain us for years to come. You know that, Mika."

"I can't believe you lied to everyone."

"Just follow orders this one last time, damn it!"

The wheels on Admiral Callum's wheelchair sink into the sludgy soil as he exits the decontamination chamber. He takes a deep breath, letting the air scald and burn his lungs. Then he looks up. And waits.

In the sky, an explosion blossoms. New York falls. Admiral Callum closes his eyes.

Sinners and Saints

Jane Cox

Third Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2023 Young Writers' Contest

Dulaney High School—Timonium, MD

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Now

The bitter wind bites into Delilah's skin as the maelstrom rages in the back of her mind. Her backpack's straps dig into her pockmarked shoulders. *I'll be needing a new one soon*, she thinks idly. Delilah creeps along the blocks of rubble amidst the overgrown once-city, keeping half an eye on the swirling storm above. They'd called it God, a long time ago. She isn't sure anymore.

A Long Time Ago

Delilah, young, fresh, and scared, brown hair pulled through a painful bow, sat in a church pew, dwarfed by her father and the too-many strangers crammed into their little church. It was early days of the End, and terrified sinners had flocked to the church to pray. Father didn't like that: he thought that those who had lived in sin could at least have the decency to die in it. In private though, Delilah quietly thought that the newcomers weren't so bad. She thought the swirling mass in the sky, the maelstrom that baffled scientists and drove men mad was a more pressing concern.

Pastor Harris slowly entered, and Delilah braced herself for another long, boring sermon. But as he turned to face the masses spilling out from the pews, she noticed a strange look in his eyes. Wild, unrestrained. Movements just a bit too jerky, he began to speak.

Now

Flipping back her untamed hair, Delilah scrambles over the pileup of cars blocking her path. It was something she'd done a thousand times before, could do in her sleep. She lets herself go into autopilot, drifting into the comfort of the storm, pondering—

Ouch!

Delilah's hand catches on the raw edge of a hubcap, slicing into her palm. She falls onto the cracked pavement, frantically inspecting her hand, watching blood drip onto the street.

Bad, this is very very bad, Delilah realizes.

She springs to her feet, spinning around, looking, seeing nothing. Feeling her heart in her throat, she circles, trying desperately to decide which way to run. Finally, finally, after she's already wasted too much time, she begins to feel the pounding in the back of her head, the shivers on the back of her neck. Almost against her will, her head swivels, her feet drag, pulling her East, towards the Angel.

She runs West.

A Long Time Ago

"Ladies and gentlemen, a time for celebration is upon us," Pastor Harris drawled, body twitching in a way too sharp to be strictly natural. "I want you all to realize, as I have realized, that there is no reason to be afraid. Not for us. No, my friends, I hope you all believe, as I believe, that the new age we are entering is the time of God on Earth."

The crowd began to murmur, nervously noting the pastor's odd movements and dreamlike voice. As he continued, rambling in an increasingly fanatic manner about the Rapture and the Second Coming, and heaven and hell on earth, people began to slip out the doors. Slowly at first, then gradually picking up, the

church began to empty. Delilah grabbed Father's hand, trying to pull him to his feet. He refused to budge. She kept pulling, growing more and more desperate, until—

Harshly, Father gripped Delilah's wrist, wrenching her back down into the pew. His eyes remained rapturously transfixed upon the sermon, as did the eyes of a few others. She found herself alone in the church with Pastor Harris, a rambling madman, and the masses, transfixed upon him.

"And now, my children," the pastor drawled, "here you remain, as the unworthy sinners fled. Blessed are you, children of God, who will rise from the ashes of our rotten world as his Angels, his Saints. Yes, while the rotten sinners remain trapped here on this dying Earth, we, the Saints, will ascend, and will join him in his conquest. And as we join him, we will feed him, we will lend him the strength to finally take back this mortal coil, end the millenia long reign of Evil." Pastor Harris grew more and more frightening, head jerking, responding to sounds that weren't there, even as his speech grew smoother, and deeper, echoing with the voices of thousands. Delilah had seen this before, but never this close, this strong.

She found herself frozen to the pew in terror. She didn't know what was happening, she didn't know what to do, or where—

"Delilah!" an urgent voice whispered.

She whipped around towards whatever new terror this was, to face—

Blonde hair, haloed by the sun— Mary. Delilah's... Delilah's...friend. Her friend. Definitely friend.

Mary grabbed her other hand, and with much effort, the two girls wrested Delilah's wrist from her Father's grasp. They fled, out of the church door and onto the steps, Father slowly shaking himself from his trance.

Now

Delilah flees the growing buzzing in the back of her mind that she's long since come to know as the Angels' harbinger. She runs, frantically bounding over the rubble and desecration of the city. As she runs, she berates herself for slipping up, for spilling blood on such a simple obstacle. She sprints past blurs of gray and black, not stopping to assess danger as she normally would.

As her heart pounds, she feels the storm pick up, in both her mind and the sky. The buzzing grows louder and louder, threatening the madness that has taken so many before her. The swirling sky seems to spin even faster, as larger and larger chunks of rubble begin lifting up into the storm.

Delilah begins to use the lifting rubble, leaping onto chunks as they fly into the sky, slipping through precarious paths with reckless abandon. She feels hope, high in her throat, that she might actually get away this time, that she might actually manage to avoid him. She vaults onto an old, half rotted door as it flies into the sky.

Doubling over, Delilah pants frantically, trying to catch her breath. She leans forward onto her hands, staring down at the ornate carvings below her. Swirling vines, and flowers and—a drop of blood.

Delilah looks down at the ground. Too far to jump now, too late to run. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

Steeling herself, Delilah takes a deep breath, gets to her feet, and looks up at the Angel. Her Father's face, dripping in blood, stares back at her with hollow eyes.

A Long Time Ago

Holding hands, Delilah and Mary fled from the church, spilling out onto the street. By now, the sinners had all dispersed, and the street was ominous, empty. Mary dragged Delilah through the broken glass door of a coffee shop, then pulled her into the backroom.

"Mary, I don't think we're supposed to be in here, maybe we should—" "Delilah! Come on, the world's gone crazy, who cares?"

Finally, Mary stopped, breath heaving, and turned to face Delilah. Delilah paused to take stock of Mary's appearance for the first time. Usually ringleted golden curls were wild around her face, and was that blood on her shirt? Still, Delilah couldn't help but notice how pretty Mary looked, how—

No Delilah, bad Delilah.

"What happened in the church?" Mary demanded. "I saw the stampede from across the street." "I don't—I—Pastor Harris—he was rambling."

"Pastor Harris always rambles, what did he say?"

"He said that the storm was God. He said that it would take the sinners, and the saints would—I don't know, he said they'd ascend but I don't know what that means—Mary, why do you have blood on your shirt?"

Mary looked down, as if noticing the blood for the first time, then tossed her hair forward flippantly. "This? Oh, it's nothing, there were just a lot of people in the street, and they were all running away from the church and I was running for you." She blushed suddenly, as if she hadn't meant to say that. "For the church, I mean. Which you were in."

Delilah blushed. Mary blushed harder.

"I just—" Mary continued haltingly, all bravado suddenly gone. "I just had to see that you were ok. So much has been happening and I just feel like I need—"

Suddenly, awkwardly, Delilah surged forward and kissed Mary.

"Sorry! Sorry," Delilah cried, springing back. "I don't know why I did that, I just—" Mary kissed her back.

The echoes of Delilah's Father, of Pastor Harris, ricocheted in her mind. Mary threw her hands over her shoulders. Delilah thought of sin. Delilah thought of Mary. It was exhilarating, it was terrifying, it was—

"What in all hell is this?"

It was Father, standing in the doorway with wild eyes.

Now

It's Father, dripping blood from his gouged-out eyes, and from his stained-red wings. Delilah suddenly feels small again, small in a way she hasn't in years. The Angel menaces above her, floating far more gently on the rotten door than she.

He swings his head down to face her, far too fluid. Voice layered over itself a thousand times, he begins to speak:

"Delilah." he begins.

"Father," Delilah tries, attempting to keep her voice from trembling.

"Do not call me that. No creature as wicked as you is any daughter of mine."

"I—sorry. I just—I'm so sorry, I'm so—You don't have to tell me I'm wicked, I already know that, I know that I'm a sinner, I just—"

The Angel suddenly raises his hand to cut her off. She quiets, immediately. This, scary as it is, feels almost familiar, not so different from when he was alive. A drop of his blood flies off of it onto her face, slowly sliding down her cheek. As it falls down her chin, the storm picks it up, and Delilah watches the blood pour back into the sky.

He reaches his outstretched hand forward and down, slowly and smoothly cupping her cheek. He smells of iron and ozone. He feels like terror and home.

"God forgives sinners," the Angel says, empty sockets arranging themselves in a look almost akin to kindness.

"But Parricide was the original sin."

Father's hand clutches around her throat.

A Long Time Ago

Father stood in the doorway, enormous, unsteady, and angry. Mary started moving before Delilah had even processed, spinning them around to be between Delilah and Father. She stood between them, tiny but full of steel nonetheless.

"After all I've done for you Delilah, the work I've done to keep you on the path of God, you go and... and... drag yourself into the pits of sin the moment I turn my head?" Father seemed to be growing bigger and bigger, arms flying dangerously, uncannily. Delilah backed away into shelves of coffee beans, trying to make herself smaller.

Mary took a step forward, pleading: "I'm really sorry Sir, this is all my fault, please don't blame Delilah, she really didn't do anything wrong." She was marking Father, stepping in time with his swaying, staying between him and his daughter. Delilah felt a rush of affection, masked under a deep layer of terror.

Mary continued: "Sir! Mr. Lorelei! This really isn't Delilah's fault, I ran in and—"

Father flung out his hand, grabbing Mary's wrist. He lifted her with supernatural strength, throwing her above his head as she kicked her feet wildly. He reached his other hand out, grabbing her by the neck as she scratched at his arms frantically. Delilah couldn't think, she couldn't breathe, she couldn't move—oh God oh God oh—

"Father please! Dad, please, please stop it, just—"

Father tossed Mary like a ragdoll to the side, slamming her into the basin of a sink. Delilah screamed in shock and horror as Mary's head lashed back into the basin. There was a sickening crunch, as blood and water and ceramic shards leapt from the impact.

Delilah screamed, and screamed and screamed, and ran towards Mary to—

Father plucked Delilah off the ground like she weighed nothing. Delilah noticed, as time seemed to slow, the bulging veins on his forehead- a sickly black, and his blown out pupils, and the look of abject rage on his face.

Delilah realized, in a moment of clarity, that she was about to die here, with her Father's hands wrapped around her throat.

Now

A sense of déjà vu surrounds Delilah as the Angelic form of her Father closes his hand around her neck. Instead of blown out pupils, she sees bleeding sockets, instead of rage, a divine calm. The Angel lifts her, feet dangling a few inches above the platform.

"As Cain killed Abel, you, Delilah Lorelei, have committed the original sin. To raise your hand against your father, blood against blood, flesh against flesh, one's heart must be black with evil. And I know, as rotten as you are, that you know your scripture. I know that you know the wage of sin is death."

A Long Time Ago

In the moment of total calm, total clarity, Delilah felt it for the first time. The storm, the God, the swirling maelstrom outside. She felt her God draw nearer as the oxygen crept from her lungs. She knew, instinctively, that her God was reaching his hand out to her, asking him to join him as an Angel in his choir.

She knew, desperately, that she wanted to live.

Delilah, kicking and screaming, flung out her hands to her Father's face and began to dig her fingers into his eyes. He was the one screaming now, dropping his hands from Delilah's neck, and yet she hung on,

digging deeper while blood poured out, mixing with the water leaking out onto the floor, staining Mary's clothes as she laid on the ground.

Now

"I know that I'm a sinner, I know that," Delilah coughs out. "But you know what? If I'm evil, it's because you made me this way. It was you, you were the one who ruined me. So if I'm a sinner, then you're a sinner too!"

The Angel's serene mask slips for the first time, a brief look of confusion, or perhaps fear, glances over his face, before falling back into tranquility.

A Long Time Ago

Father fell to the ground, wailing and trying to protect his eyes. Delilah fell on top of him, seizing a chunk of ceramic where it fell from the shattered sink. Like Cain, she held it aloft, slamming it into his skull, over and over and over, until her Father stopped moving.

Now

"I'm a sinner, but you—you're evil, as evil as they come," Delilah realizes, seeing real terror on her Father's face. "So I don't know who the hell you are, but I know you're no Angel."

Delilah feels a hollow triumph as the Angel wails, dropping her onto the door and slowly crumbling into ashes, returning to the storm.

A Long Time Ago

Delilah crawled, numb, towards Mary, hoping desperately. She was met only with glazed eyes and the broken body of a teenage girl.

Now and Long Ago

Delilah is alone, under the storm.

BSFS Congratulates the Winners of the Jack L. Chalker 2023 Young Writers' Contest

First Place

"When You Wake"

Mai-Anh Nguyen
Oakland Mills High School—Columbia, MD

.....

Third Place

"Sinners and Saints"

Jane Cox
Dulaney High School—Timonium, MD

.....

Honorable Mention

"Straw Wings and Golden Things"

Gloria Liang
North Potomac, MD

Second Place

"Little Birdie"

Feiyang Shen
Dulaney High School—Timonium, MD

.....

Honorable Mention

"A Public Service Announcement"

Liam Brune
Loyola Blakefield—Towson, MD

.....

Honorable Mention

"The Ennui of AI"

Naomi McKenna
Laurel, MD