

# The Development Office Archives: The Flat Logs

Caden Heiser-Cerrato

First Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2021 Young Writers' Contest

Loyola Blakefield—Towson, MD

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*December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2340*

Mother and father are arguing again about FLAT. Their voices are bouncing off the walls and around my head. Mother wants to take FLAT and father thinks that it's not worth the pay increase. 400 to 800 cez a month is an increase that would better our lives, especially mine. Mother works in the factory, as does father, as does everyone. They make the same robots that feed us and do the upkeep and run everything.

Everyone in our block works in the closest factory called Frolic. I looked that word up in the dictionary and it means "to move with playful fervor." Mother and father aren't happy when they return from Frolic at nighttime. They seem tired. Their eyelids droop and their eyes are red, and they say things like "we aren't in the mood to talk." They don't "frolic."

There isn't much around here. Apart from the factories there is the Development Office (it's usually called Development). Those that work there run the factories and create everything that's new. They made FLAT and they're pushing the product through the factories relentlessly, bumping up pay to the willing.

I don't really get to talk to mother or father during the day because they're always working. I also have school. In school, they teach us basic skills in language and math, but the majority of our lessons are on how to properly work the factory machines and not cut off our hands. It's my last year learning. Next year I move to the junior division of the factories.

I can make small bots up there. Bots that clean the dirt off of floors. The senior division makes the type of bots to keep us all safe and in-line. It is good to be in-line. In-line is acting like everyone else and adhering to Development. I would hate to not be in-line. Mother likes in-line. Father thinks in-line is too much of a burden.

Father's brother used to head up a senior division of the factory before he stepped out of in-line. The bots he himself built ended up taking him somewhere else. Father used to spend some of his cez on alco when his brother was taken away.

Father had an eval on him last year because he had too much alco. He was reviewed by other senior division people and they banned him from alco for a little bit, on account of productivity. Father forced himself to stop thinking about his brother.

Mother doesn't drink alco. She is more focused than father. She is more in-line. She is a better senior than father is. Their talk has died down now. They discuss productivity and individual output. Mother says father needs to focus. He should focus.

Mother told me once, before her shifts lengthened, that father was known as a daydreamer in the junior division. That's where they met. They developed a strong bond. Back then it was called love, now it is called passion. They were in passion then. They certified their passion and then got permission for me. Here I am. They named me Elation. The word elation was used a lot before now. Now it is archaic. I am both archaic and current, I guess.

Mother calls me into their room now. It is a small room, very sterilized. There is one artificial light. They are sitting on their bed. Father tells me that mother has decided to take FLAT next week. He says he is not going to take it. I say okay. I say I am going out. They say okay.

I leave our cell. I travel down our block, down the endless grey staircase. Down the fifteen levels. I run, skipping steps, so that I won't miss the sunset. I am panting when I hop down the last step and open the door to the outside. Someone else walks into the staircase from the apartments.

The sun is fading and pink and purple spill across the sky like paint. Nobody is allowed to sell paint like that. Development can regulate paint, but they can't regulate the sky. I watch the sun trail off under the horizon.

Someone yells Elation. I turn. It is Southward. My friend Southward walks over to me. He lives on our block. He is also districted to Frolic. I say hello to him, how are you Southward. He says he is positive.

Southward is a refraction of me. He has black hair, too but he uses a middle part, and I push mine to the right. He is neutral color, like me, but he is shorter and a little chubbier. We both don't have freckles. No one really has freckles.

I tell Southward the sunset was positive. He nods in affirmation. He walks away. I like Southward. It's too negative that his mother left the block. After FLAT came out, she ran away. Development can't find her anywhere. They think she may have ended.

It is getting dark, so I head inside up the stairs to my cell. I climb onto my mattress and the lights go off.

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*December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2340*

It is next week. Mother took FLAT. Development said she would be out for about a week, resting. I still don't know much about it. It just increases productivity. The door to father

and mother's room is often closed. Father doesn't let me go in there. He has been drinking more alco lately. I don't think it's about his brother. Father threw out all of the photos and statements about his brother a few days ago.

Tomorrow, I graduate from school, and next week, when the new year begins, I will start working in the junior division. I desire to be very in-line as a worker. I think I will go see Southward. Southward's father has also been having a lot of alco lately, and Southward is covered in welts.

Southward told me not to report the welts because he doesn't want to be a Ward. Without both of his parents, everything would be seized, and he would have to work and live in the factory. We meet up in the stairwell. Southward has more welts today, and his plain white shirt has a small spot of blood. He tells me that his mother left for a reason. He found the note taped to the bottom of his bed frame. The cleaning bot couldn't get it off.

His mother worked in a different level of the factory, near where Development sometimes had meetings. She apparently overheard a discussion. It was about the forced implementation of FLAT. She wrote in the note that Development was going to start forcing workers to take FLAT. She said she wanted to keep herself. He didn't know what that meant. Neither did I. There was a sort of mystery to those words.

Southward told me not to tell anyone. I decided not to tell anyone. FLAT didn't seem like a bad thing. According to Development, it increases productivity by 100%, leading to an increase in wages of 100%. I'm surprised father did not volunteer to take it. Southward's father has refused it also. Southward didn't show him the note.

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*December 28<sup>th</sup>, 2340*

I graduated this day. The "ceremony" was short. In two weeks, I move to the junior division. I welcome this change. In six days,

mother will be ready to engage in work and engage with me once again.

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*January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2341*

Mother has finished resting. She did not speak to me or father after leaving her room. She ate breakfast silently, staring intently at the wall. There is nothing on our wall. She left for the factory immediately.

I spent the day reading more about FLAT. The manual given by Development says that it has no negative side effects and is safe for adult consumption. Another manual came today. This manual said it was safe for consumption at the junior division level.

Father told me that something felt different with her. I asked if she was more in-line than before. He said it wasn't that. I asked why he thought that. He said that she threw away all the alco he bought with his cez.

She returned for dinner and said nothing. We ate in silence. I asked her how she felt after FLAT. She didn't look up from her food. I yelled for her to respond. Father took me out of the room, and he said I shouldn't yell at her. I said why. I said she has something wrong. Father said it might be FLAT. I told him it couldn't be FLAT. FLAT increases productivity. It makes workers better.

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*January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2341*

This is my second week of break before the junior division. Mother said a word yesterday after father asked her about the factory. He asked how work had been. She said positive. I've been looking at her eyes for the past couple of meals and there is just complete blankness.

We received about three manuals about FLAT today. For some reason, mother hasn't received a pay increase, and when we asked her about getting the money she deserves, she didn't say anything. Every time father has alco in front of her, she leaves the room. When father leaves

a bottle of alco on the table, and goes to his room, she throws the alco away.

Southward became a Ward yesterday, after someone saw his welts and reported it. He lost anything he could have gotten from his father. His father was taken to the reform bots and given FLAT. This was told to me by my father. He seems very against FLAT.

I went down the stairwells today to see the sunset. I passed many people returning from work. Many of them had blank eyes that bore into the greyish stairs and walls of the stairwell. They didn't even look at me.

Development also sent us a name change form. They ruled that archaic names like Elation and Wrath were no longer permissible. Father and I decided to change my name to Carl. Carl was his brother's name. Even though father threw away all the pictures and reports, I could tell he still missed his brother.

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*January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2341*

This is my last day of break. Mother got mail from Development saying her mother ended. She had no reaction. She read it and threw it away. She also threw away pictures of her and dad from earlier years. Father said that her productivity had increased by 100% as claimed by Development.

Development sent us 10 manuals about FLAT today. Some had father's name and suggested that he do it soon before he wouldn't receive any benefits. One had my name, telling me that I needed FLAT to keep up with the demands of the junior division.

We went to throw them away, but mother stopped us and said her second word, no. She lives within our cell but walks around like a ghost. Her pay increase never came and she has taken down every picture, to the dismay of father. In their steads, she has put up posters, distributed for free by Development, suggesting we stay in-line.

In-line seems less honorable than it used to. Father isn't as in-line as mother, but she seems to be missing. I think FLAT may have done this to her. It may have taken her.

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*January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2341*

I started junior division today and half of the kids there gazed absently at me. Whenever their eyes turned to the machines, they widened and focused intently. I found this behavior strange, and the productivity managers told me they were in-line, they were proper. They recommended I get FLAT. I said my mother got FLAT and she doesn't talk anymore. They told me she was like that before FLAT. I told them no she wasn't. They asked if I needed to be reformed. I said no and got back to work.

Father took FLAT tonight. He was required to by Frolic. I begged him not to take it. It was required so he took it despite my pleas. I went down the stairway to the sunset, and everyone was going up the stairs, not down them. They all looked at me like I was part of the steps.

I was the only one outside watching the sunset. I saw the form of a boy appear in the distance. He walked towards me. The violet hues of the dying sun were behind him, and as he got closer, I realized that it was Southward. I said hello to him. He walked past me without even looking at my face. There was a small faraway smile tugging at the edges of his lips. His form faded as he walked away, until he blended in with the grey buildings he was moving towards.

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*January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2341*

A few days have passed. Father finished resting yesterday. Now father and mother look at each other with empty eyes and pile up all of the manuals I receive about FLAT. More manuals pour in every day, and they tell me, Carl, that I must take FLAT to keep up.

Work at Frolic has been difficult. I am one of the only kids without the glazed eyes. My output is one of the lowest as well. The production manager, who has full, incisive eyes, has started to demand that I take FLAT. He told me that I better take it by tomorrow, or else he will have it done for me.

I no longer want to be in-line. I want to be out of in-line. I think I will leave tonight, after mother and father have gone to sleep.

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The contents of this journal have been banned by the Development Team. If you are authorized, read analytically, take in the total and utter unproductivity by the author. If you are unauthorized, take the FLAT pill. It is required by law. Stay in-line. In-line is positive. Productivity is positive. FLAT is positive.

# Migration

Lila Bacas

**Second Place**, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2021 Young Writers' Contest

Dulaney High School—Timonium, MD

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A full moon. Large—close to the planet—and radiant, too. A portent of a safe migration, I've been told. The gargantuan tower blocks out most of its white light. We walk away, in a tight group of ten, along its protective shadow. I cling to that shadow.

Since I was about three years old, that tower has made my life; I've spent twelve years watching its shadow run from the sun from rise to set. I've seen families of birds raise their young in its age-forged grooves and holes. My two sisters have chased me in more circles around it than I can count. Now, I'm too far from the tower to see the footpath we wore in its surrounding dirt.

This migration is routine—my mother says so. The far tower across the plains is calling to us, sending its words to us intermittently. The tower we must leave will soon be occupied by another small group of people who are, right now, beginning the same routine migration as us. They, however, will have to cross hills.

My mother, behind me in the procession, pulls along a horse on a lead, heavy bags hanging from its saddle. Flanking me, my sisters each carry a patchwork sack of their little things. The younger one stumbles as her comb falls through a hole in her bag.

"Mom—dropped!"

My young sister's sudden loss of words alarms her. Her face twists in panic.

"Oh my, is it happening already?" My mother stops and turns to the tower. "I didn't think we'd covered that much ground."

"You seem fine," I tell her. "I can't even tell what words you've lost."

"We'll see about that once we reach the end of the shadow."

A sudden anxiety wells up in me. "How did the last migration go? I was too young to remember."

"It went well. It was scary, as always, but what can you do? We'll be okay," she reassures me, patting my shoulder. "Just focus on our destination, the tower ahead."

In a nervous daze, my eyes drift back to the old tower.

"Focus!"

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We've covered half the shadow. We're beginning to interfere. Other tower—can see like speck of dust. We lose our tower's words. Not yet gain theirs. Gain noise, gain nothing.

"Mom! Weird!" my young sister cries.

"Get used to it," says my mother, failing not to sound harsh with few remaining words.

“How long without words?” I say.

“I think, another five hours.”

“Five hours?” I whine. I don’t mean to sound so childish.

“Focus, focus, focus.” She gives my back little shove.

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Shadow gone. New tower close. Three or less, in time.

Can’t communicate—all we have is trust.

I sigh. Sister weeps. Never lost words before. Mother only looks tower. Pulls horse along. Never breaks her stare.

Focus.

\*\*\*

moon

above

bright

path

dark noon

no shadow

stop

wet

head brimming nothing

loss

loss

empty

full

focus

\*\*\*

Earlier, hour ago, stopped for drink. Silence, silence, silence. All open mouth for water, then close. Few hugs. Tight and long. Helped less empty. Moon watched us, too. Does she know I need her?

Shadow of new tower cast in our direction. Moon setting few hours. Feel less strained. Sisters tired, mother carry one. Other on horse.

“Keep on focusing,” mother says. She nudges me.

“I haven’t stopped.”

Feel bad for getting scared, upset, ‘but what can you do?’ I’m just kid. Many more migrations to come. Be like her one day, maybe.

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The sky is beginning to lighten. The stars are fading; the moon is almost beyond view. The sun is coming up in the direction we came from, painting the far tower’s horizon a blazing red. Conversation has started up again. When we realized most of our words were coming back, my uncle told us a story from a migration they had as children. He said the first word my mother lost was “focus.” Funny. Instead of telling her brother to “focus,” grappling for a word that could fill its place, she told him to “shut up.” I wish I had been there.

I focus on the tower ahead. It looks massive—I can’t see its tip. I don’t need to see all of it to feel it; I don’t need to understand it to gain its words. I rejoice in talking when I don’t need to. I say what I think. I look down at my youngest sister’s face.

“Think you can handle another migration in, say, ten years?” I ask, grinning.

“No!” she screams. “No, no, no! Not even if Mom’s here.”

“Hey—who knows what you’ll grow into with this tower’s words? Wait and see!”

She pouts to put away a smile.



# An Ice Storm in the Making

Amanda Bair

**Third Place (Tie)**, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2021 Young Writers' Contest

Cambridge-South Dorchester High School—Cambridge, MD

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I always wanted to be the hero.

Like many kids, I grew up fascinated with superheroes. My weekends were spent watching marathons of Marvel and DC movies: everything from Ironman to Superman to Spiderman to Batman to the Hulk to Captain America. After every movie, my heart raced, adrenaline coursing through my veins as I celebrated my triumphs as if I had accomplished all the spectacular things I had just witnessed.

Superheroes did not stay within the pages of comic books or the frames of movies, though. They followed me throughout the day, my own personal imaginary friends to encourage me when the other kids bullied me for being such a superhero geek.

I didn't know how quickly things would change.

One winter morning, I was shoveling snow off of the deck surrounding the in-ground swimming pool my family had. It was a pain-staking, tedious job, and as it dragged on, I felt my body going numb even though I wore several layers of warm clothing.

My limbs became stiffer and stiffer as hypothermia began to set in, making it harder to walk around the slippery deck. After I finally launched the last bit of snow into the grassy yard, I turned to head inside, but my brain fired faster than my body could respond in the freezing temperatures. My legs locked and I tripped over their stiffness, falling backwards and crashing through the flimsy pool cover below. It ripped upon impact, and before I knew what was happening, I was submerged in arctic waters.

I couldn't move. My body was as frozen as the icicles I had seen hanging from my roof earlier that morning. No matter how much my brain demanded that my limbs move or my lungs screamed for oxygen, I could do nothing: I was paralyzed. Before I knew what was happening, water forced its way into my nose and mouth and the world slowly went dark.

I don't know how long I stayed like that, caught in a limbo between the living and the dead. The next thing I knew, I was gasping for air with burning lungs as a group of people circled me, coaxing me through the uncomfortable situation. Somebody nearly tackled me to the ground as I continued to choke and splutter, and it took me a few seconds to realize that it was my hyperventilating mother. The world was still hazy as the men—paramedics, I was told later—began to run tests on me, ensuring that there were no lasting complications. When they deemed that I was well, they packed up their things and left.

After waking up, I felt different. I couldn't focus on the relief of having survived such a catastrophic event because it felt like live electricity ran through my veins and arteries, energizing me from the inside out. I asked my parents about it constantly, but they always said the same thing: it was just a side effect of the shock my body experienced during the accident. It would go away soon.

But it didn't. At first, I noticed that I was extremely cold. My skin felt like ice to the touch, causing many people to jerk away from me whenever they touched me. It got so bad that people

would shiver even when they walked past me, causing them to avoid me more than usual. It was during one lonely walk home that I finally realized what everything meant.

It had been almost a month since the accident and spring was around the corner. I had decided to lean against my neighbor's tree to admire the new blooms blossoming from their large Magnolia tree. My peace was quickly interrupted, though, when I felt something cold and wet form beneath my hand, causing me to slip and stumble.

When I looked back at the trunk, I noticed that there was an icy handprint residing where my own hand had been only moments before. I stared at it quizzically, wondering where the ice could have come from. The sun was shining, the birds were chirping. There was no way that winter could be the culprit this time.

I leaned tentatively against the tree again, holding my breath as I awaited answers. I nearly screamed as ice began to form under my palm yet again, ripping my hand away as quickly as I had placed it there.

I formed the ice.

I collapsed to the ground as my thoughts overwhelmed me, celebrations and worries fighting for dominance in my head. This was simultaneously the best and worst news I could have received. My heart fluttered at the thought of this being my superhero backstory, but deep down, I was afraid of what other people would say. People already thought I was a loser and an outcast, so what would they think now?

I tried all night, but I couldn't figure out how to control my icy touch on my own. It was only when I wrapped them up with thick leather gloves that I could find any respite from my newfound powers.

This superhero thing was going to be a lot harder than I thought.

The next morning, I trudged to school, but not without a fight to stay home. My complaints fell on deaf ears as I was pushed towards the front door, signaling the end of the argument.

When I got to school, I couldn't stop shaking. The idea of letting my classmates discover my secret petrified me more than anything else ever had. However, as time ticked on, I relaxed, believing that the gloves would save me.

I was wrong.

As time wore on, the ice did too. It fought slowly but surely, freezing the fibers within the gloves as it struggled to reach the surface. I didn't notice, though, until it was too late, my gloves gradually covered in a thin layer of ice.

The girl sitting next to me noticed before I could hide the offending evidence. She announced her findings to the entire class before directing her questions at me. Before I could even answer, she was ripping the gloves off of my hand, creating a burst of ice as she did so.

It didn't take the class long to figure out the rest. The entire room was deathly silent for five seconds as the students considered the evidence in front of them. However, after everyone exchanged a quick glance, they rushed to my desk, barraging me with questions about my ice powers.

From that day on, everyone at school became my friend. I put on ice shows for them, celebrating whenever I learned a new trick. Over time, I learned to control my powers, and I finally had friends to cheer me on.

All good things must come to an end, though, and so they did on that fateful day.

I couldn't sit still: my nerves seemed to come to life as they tingled and buzzed underneath my skin. Sitting in the classroom became a pain as I switched between bouncing my knees and stretching, hoping to rid myself of this extra energy before it began to interfere with my studies.

My fidgeting didn't go unnoticed, though. Several of the girls sitting near me stared at me with concern, checking on me as class dragged on. At first, their questions embarrassed me, causing my cheeks to heat up as I considered how weird I truly looked. However, as time



slowly ticked by and my energy spiked, my embarrassment quickly converted to anger.

“Seriously, are you okay?” Veronica, a popular girl with long, straight black hair and perfectly winged eyeliner, asked, concern and slight irritation seeping into her voice.

“I’m fine,” I gritted between clenched teeth, my body tense with the effort it took to sit in my uncomfortable plastic seat and listen to the teacher’s dreadfully boring lesson on the exposition of stories.

“Do you have something to say to the class, Eira?” my teacher, Mr. Blaze, snapped as he glared at me. I could feel the blood rushing to my cheeks as the eyes of every student fell on me, waiting for my verdict.

“No, I’m sorry for interrupting,” I sighed, trying my best to hide my indignation and frustration.

I hoped that the altercation would dissuade others from acknowledging me, but it did the opposite as my classmates grew even more curious.

“What’s up with you today?” Alya, a bouncing brunette with an outstanding jump shot on the court, whispered as she leaned closer to me, “You’ve been acting strange since you got here.”

I huffed, refusing to validate her nosiness with a response. I just wanted to be left alone until I could sort out my problem on my own.

They couldn’t take a hint, though. Soon, Trevor, the class clown, decided to have his own fun as he started throwing paper balls at me.

When they didn’t get the reaction he wanted, he groaned to himself, opting to reach over the tiny space separating our desks as he began to poke me quickly and repeatedly. “Why won’t you answer our questions? Have your powers finally made you crazy or something?”

That did it. Before I knew what I was doing, I was on my feet, my electrified nerves prepared to finally do something.

“I SAID I’M FINE!” I screamed as I smacked his hands away from me.

He screamed in pain as he flew back into his seat, and it took me a second to realize I had frozen him. A sash of ice wrapped around him, securing him to his seat. He was gasping, tears welling in his eyes as he tried to assess his body for any lasting damage. Suddenly, the electricity that had tormented me all morning had dissipated, regret taking its place immediately.

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry!” I gaped as I ran over to him, breaking the ice and releasing him from my manmade trap. However, the ice ripped his clothes, displaying bright red marks on his skin underneath.

Ice burns.

I began to cry myself as realization took over. I had just hurt one of my classmates. What kind of hero would ever do such a thing?

In my panic, my eyes scanned the classroom, only to meet the horrified stares of my classmates and teacher. At one point, they had been amused and delighted by my frozen creations, but those feelings didn’t remain. They glared at me like I was a repulsive monster, and I could sense their fight or flight response kicking in.

Before anyone could say or do anything, I bolted from the classroom, searching for the exit. When I found one, I burst outside, sprinting until I reached the temporary safety of my home.

My parents arrived not long after me, having been called by the school and informed of my disastrous encounter with Trevor. They must not have realized that I was there, though, because they began discussing their plans.

“We can’t do this! She’s still our daughter, Daniel!” my mother shouted as the front door slammed shut.

“You heard what the cops said! She’s dangerous! She could’ve killed that boy in her class. This dart is the only way to stop her,” my father growled. His voice had a slight slur to

it: he must have been drinking before he got home.

“I refuse to hand my daughter over to those sickos so they can experiment on her! I held her in my womb for nine months, and I refuse to part with her now!” my mother screamed.

Experiments? How had the news spread to the authorities so quickly? Were they planning this all along, just waiting for me to mess up so they could carry out their sick, twisted fantasies?

“Well, you heard what they said. If anyone gets in their way, they’re going to remove them permanently,” my father snapped. I heard him open the refrigerator, followed by the clink of a glass bottle. “Take a drink, it’ll make you feel better.”

I couldn’t listen to their conversation anymore, the fear of my predicament coupling with the contempt I felt for my father in this moment. How dare he give me up to those lunatics before he even heard my side of the story?

My heart raced, pumping so quickly that I could hear the blood rushing in my ears as footsteps approached my bedroom door. My mom continued to yell at my dad, but her words became incomprehensible as I searched for an exit. My eyes landed on the open window, and I knew I had to leave.

I scrambled outside just in time to hear my bedroom door burst open, my dad’s indignant shouts fading as I sprinted towards the wooded area located behind my house. I didn’t stop, ignoring my screaming muscles as they burned, begging for rest and oxygen.

I kept my hands hidden in my sleeves, preventing myself from touching anything for fear that I would leave an icy trail behind. I didn’t know where I was going: all I knew was that I needed to leave. Over time, the silence of

the woods became almost peaceful despite my unthinkable situation.

The peace wouldn’t last, though, as soon, I heard the shouts of tired, angry men as they gained on me.

“She’s over here!” one stranger screamed, his red face smirking as a newfound confidence overtook him at the sight of me.

“Don’t let her get away!” another man yelled as he pushed on. I could only barely make out the outline of a pitchfork in his hand.

Had this been any other situation, I would’ve laughed at the sight.

The men continued to get closer and closer as my tired muscles begged for a break. I could sense them behind me, feeling the ground shake beneath my feet as they closed the gap between us.

I didn’t want to do it, but I had to.

Without a second thought, I flung my arm behind myself, freezing the men at the front of the pack in their spots. I heard the horrified gasps of the other men as they examined their friends, crying for help that may or may not come. I didn’t have time to care about them, though. I just had to get out of there.

When I had put a comfortable distance between me and the mob, I stopped, opting to create a large wall of ice that would be impossible for them to climb. I tried to make it as wide as possible, hoping that it would at least slow them down.

With my obstacle in place, I turned around and began running again. I didn’t know where I was going, but I knew that I had to move forward. They made it clear that they wouldn’t stop until they caught me.

I always wanted to be the hero, but now, I would have to be the villain.

# The Planetkiller's Song

Anastasia Kelly

**Third Place (Tie)**, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2021 Young Writers' Contest

Bryn Mawr School—Baltimore, MD

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These days, Nero mused, no one appreciates how difficult it is to kill a planet.

He patted his pockets and produced a sleek tin, designed to fit snugly against the curve of his leg. It was an expensive case, the ore mined from a skeleton planet, that material forged in the carbon fires of the terran colonies, designed and assembled by the blind titans of Nero's home planet. It was expensive and exquisite, and worth every drop of blood that paid for it.

But then again, it wasn't his blood spent.

Nero ran a gloved finger over the engraving on the lid. It was invisible to the eye and he couldn't feel the indents of the lettering through his glove, but Nero knew the words blind. He would not soon forget them.

He took a breath to savor the moment. Stale oxygen, filtered through his helmet, stung his nostrils. What the hell. This was the end of something. Might as well enjoy it. Nero removed his helmet and inhaled the atmosphere of the planet. He'd forgotten its name, which struck him as sad and fitting. It smelled like flowers. Pity.

His ship groaned and shifted. It was starting in earnest now. Normally, Nero stood for this part, out of respect and so he could leave quickly, but this was the end of something. He would sit and take his time.

Nero played with the latch of the tin. He would open it in a moment. Not yet. The engines of his ship hissed with effort. This planet of steam and mist was so lovely, its surface roiling and flaring like the heads of clouds.

There it was.

Off to his left, barely perceptible at this distance, the cloud surface bulged then burst, freed droplets flashing red through the light of nearby star.

And there it was.

In English, they were called the Santiam. English, in Nero's rarely humble opinion, was an aggressive, convoluted language. He avoided speaking it whenever possible. He didn't like terrans either, or at least the ones who spoke English, because they were aggressive and convoluted too. He did not like English words. And for the Santiam, there were other names in other languages, but in Nero's rarely humble opinion, the others simply did not compare. Not this time.

Santiam. Sunray. The most beautiful thing Nero had ever killed.

A Santiam escaped from the cloud surface in a graceful arc. It was a silver bullet, exposing a lilac underbelly to the planet's sun. The starlight hit the Santiam, and there it was.

Its skin turned clear, and then blue and pink and purple and green and white and yellow and black and blue again. The colors rippled and pulled, pearlescent waves crashing against each other in inky swells. The Santiam opened its wings, pink then gray tails whipping behind it. Electric lines of blue forked across its outstretched wings.

Nero tapped his cigarette case against his chin. There was a poem he knew once, terran, probably.

*The star caught the creature up/ and the creature in turn shone divinity down—*

He didn't remember how it ended. Something about physics, Nero thought, or religion. He never could tell the difference.

The Santiam reached the peak of its arc. Nero nearly looked away. He had never looked away before. Well, that was a sign, if he'd ever seen one. Retirement loomed.

Nero removed a cigarette from the case and put it between his lips. The lighter (antique and ridiculous) was already in his hands. He opened it. Coaxed forth a flame.

He looked up.

The Santiam was frozen. Sprawled open, baring its insides to the sun, suspended above the surface.

And then it began.

The kaleidoscope skin turned opaque white, and a smudgy grayness emerged at its center. The Santiam began to sink, headfirst, back towards the surface. The shadow grew like the virus it was, creeping from the Santiam's brain to its wings as its flight became a fall.

Nero knew what happened next. He'd designed it, after all. He just hadn't expected to recognize it. He lit the cigarette. The Santiam died.

The darkness under its skin bloomed and blackened, blackened like carbon fire coals, and when it came in contact with the damp surface—

It shattered. It exploded. It died in a release of flesh that went out like... like a firework, that was the word.

Nero wrinkled his nose. There was limited oxygen available to his brain; the last thing he needed was terran poetry eating away at it. He exhaled smoke through cracked lips. It shielded his view for a moment before dissipating into the thin atmosphere.

When he could see again, another Santiam had slipped through the surface. Another. Another, another, another. Again, again, again.

A silver bullet, a cacophony of light, the wings, the still. The deadened collapse. The shattering like glass on concrete.

*Glass on concrete.* That was another line from a poem. Nero was a being of limited similes. He tended to borrow, rather than build. Tended to kill, rather than live.

Tended to watch death through a mask.

It affected him differently, this time. He didn't usually watch. He didn't usually smoke. He didn't usually care.

But this was the end of something.

There was an explosion to his left, near enough to shake the ship. Nero inhaled smoke. He couldn't remember when he'd first held a cigarette. It seemed important. He coughed.

Another Santiam died; a charred piece of what might have once been an organ landed by Nero's feet. It smelled like flowers.

He had to go.

Nero took another drag. He wondered if he had missed anything. Not in the job, the job would be fine. The planet of the Santiam would be empty of its native lifeform soon, stripped of claws or teeth for the vultures to safely swallow its bones.

He had to go.

The energy released as the Santiam died was devouring oxygen rapidly. The smoke from his cigarette was beginning to misbehave, lingering and curling in on itself in thread-like spirals. It was getting warmer, too, gusts of smoldering flesh getting stronger all the time.

He had to go.

Nero was a planetkiller.

He was an exterminator; he was bringer of chaos and fire and cold. *I am become death*, he thought, *no, I am become the dying*. He was a hand against entropy, or perhaps that hand that caused it. He was a wrong thing. He was the jackboot and the scalpel and the slow poison and he wanted desperately to care that this was his end of all things.

Nero wanted to stand. Lock the doors and leave this planet, leave the Santiam to their fate. But it wasn't fate, it was Nero, and he had never cared before.

Nero looked up.

And then it began.

A sound, a humming, a voice. He thought it was speaking at first, maybe crying for help, but he kept listening and the voice went on, singing. As the planet writhed and screamed. Something was *singing*.

Planetkilling was not an easy job, Nero thought, but at least he could stop doing it. He could be the last planetkiller. He finished his cigarette. He closed his eyes. The singing went on, high and reedy, a flurry of notes, up and up, breaking at their height, tumbling back down to low, skipping tones.

Nero knew, without knowing how or why, that it wasn't a sad song. It was not sad. He was not sad.

Nero lit another cigarette. He counted how many were left in the case. Too many. Ah, well. This was the end of something. It didn't matter.

He smoked fast. He savored it. The breathing was getting painful, his body rejecting his vile habit and viler soul. It would end soon. The song went on and Nero thought about a woman he hadn't thought about in a long time.

A fit of coughs like the fire in his hands trickled down his throat and found kindling in his lungs. Nero took a break from the cigarette. There was a woman beside him.

She sat with her knees tucked against her chest, maskless like him, but apparently unbothered by the decaying air and the smoke. She plucked the cigarette case from his hand and removed one for herself.



"It's the last one," she said and offered it to Nero. He shook his head. He wasn't finished with the one he had.

"Right."

The woman put the cigarette to her lips. She raised her eyebrows at him, making some kind of meaningful expression. He presented the lighter to her. She put her hands over his to steady the flame, which seemed to flash green and then white for a moment.

Nero did not understand anything.

There was a word he knew, or a phrase, in a terran language. It meant stumbling blindly in time, he thought. It meant I had done this before, I haven't done this yet.

It meant the woman's name was Julia.

Julia leaned back on her elbows and smoked while she watched the Santiam die. She did not shake while the planet beneath them shook. She did not scream while the air screamed its last, a savage cry of vengeance and sorrow and pleading and grief and the anger to break the ground and the love to pull down the sky.

She did not watch Nero while he watched her.

So, Nero finished his cigarette. Probably she was an oxygen-deprivation induced hallucination. To his knowledge, that only happened to terrans, but Julia was terran so maybe—

It was soon now. Nero was shutting down. He killed the planet; he let the planet kill him. But not Julia. She did not deserve the weight of Nero's wrongs. Yet even as the thought came to him, it was an intruder in his mind. It was—wrong. He looked at her.

There was a truth there, in the way that one cigarette never burnt out. In the way she was clear when the rest turned to haze.

He knew her. He liked her. She liked him, she looked like him, she was like him.

Nero asked, "Do you hear it too?"

Julia glanced at him. She smiled with only one side of her mouth. "The song?"

Nero nodded. Julia exhaled smoke through thin lips, watching with wide eyes as it filled her vision. She blinked.

"It's an old one," she said.

"Sounded new to me."

"Could be."

Julie shook herself and stood. She held out a hand. Nero nudged his cigarette butts into a neat pile. He took her hand.

"Who are you?" Julia said. Nero frowned. He thought she knew.

"I am no one."

"Hmm. Who destroyed you?" Nero's cigarette case was in her hand. He couldn't remember when she'd picked it up.

“Julius,” she said and touched his face. “Nero. Nemo. Odysseus. Oppenheimer. Julius. Planetkiller.” -

“Julia,” he breathed, “I don’t understand.” Julia nodded and her brows furrowed more at herself than at him.

“Why would you? You’re dying.”

“Julia.”

“You,” she said, soft and low, “will be called many things. History—we—will get it wrong. We already have. We’ll get it so wrong it turns back to something resembling right. It turns back to you.”

Nero’s heart heaved. It was trying to jump ship.

“What does that mean? Who are you?”

“Everyone,” Julia said, turning to watch the firework show of gore, her hand still resting lightly on his cheek. “What was that phrase you liked?”

“What?”

Julia flipped the cigarette case over in her palm, running her bare fingers over the microscopic engraving. “They say the first time you heard it was from an orphan. The second was from a god.”

“I don’t understand. Julia, please.”

He held his hand out for the case, but she stepped out of his reach. As he watched, a fleck of still smoldering bone skated across her cheek, opening a wound like a seam. A curtain of blood clung to her cheek.

“How did it go?” She was speaking more to herself than to him. “‘I am no one’. That’s how it starts, right?”

*I am no one.*

The voice in Nero’s mind was not his own.

*I am no one. To destroy me is to destroy all.*

“I have a theory,” Julia said, holding the case close to her face. A perfectly spherical blooddrop fell from her cheek to the metal in slow motion. “But like me, your time’s up. Are you listening? Can’t you hear it?”

Nero thought that maybe he knew something very important.

“Do you hear music?”

And Julia was gone. A Santiam died an arm’s length away. The wave of heat forced Nero back a step. He collapsed more than sat. The ship, his ship, his trusted, reliable ship, dipped and shuddered. A lonely cigarette lay smoldering apart from Nero’s pile. The planet sang. The planet died.

Nero died.

# The Path

Alison Xu

**Honorable Mention**, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2021 Young Writers' Contest

Walter Johnson High School—Bethesda, MD

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*Zing! Zing!* Acelin was sharpening his sword in short, bitter strokes. Each slash made a strident, high-pitched sound, grinding against my ears. I knew the day was coming. The day he would kill me, the king of the Qrovian kingdom.

In the centuries of being a king, I'd seen it all: the good days and the bad days, the days of glory and the days of stringency, the days of triumph and the days of loss. But no other day had made my heart ache, almost bleed, like now.

I stepped in front of the massive copper-framed mirror and my aged reflection stared at me. My once bright red-golden scales were dull and faded. My wings, which used to be a symbol of vigor and eminence, were weather-beaten and covered with scars and wounds, already losing the ability to fly.

I had to admit I was an old dragon now.

Then, Acelin's youthful face surfaced in my mind. As the kingdom's most distinguished knight, he was also the strongest human I had ever seen, broad and hefty. Acelin was a master of swordsmanship, his blade never missing any opponent he targeted. His bravery and victories won him the highest honors and numerous cheers and applause. But slowly, the humility in his eyes morphed into conceit, then greed for power.

One evening, I overheard him speaking to one of his warriors, "Soon, the crown of Qrovian will belong to me! Those old dragon limbs don't stand a chance against the wrath of my sword." His harsh cackle sliced through the air.

A chill raced down my back and brought a wrenching sorrow. I couldn't believe those words were from my dear Acelin.

The following days, I thought about taking action before he made any move. I could've thrown him into the dungeon for life or banished him to a distant desert, but I didn't. I still had a flicker of hope that Acelin didn't mean it.

But now, the shrill of his sword scraping against the rock warned me that I could be wrong.

It was a sleepless night for me. Probably for him too. The sky outside was pitch-dark, clumps of clouds obscuring the moon. The wind swished through the pine branches as if whispering a long-lost story.

The next morning, I heard a knock at the door. I was greeted by Acelin's steel-gray eyes with a savage look in them that registered a readiness to kill, his right hand on the grip of the sword at his waist.

Before Acelin said anything, I suggested in a gentle voice, "Acelin, it's a beautiful morning. Why don't we go on a walk like we used to?"

A mix of confusion and hesitation fled across his face before he replied, "...certainly."

We wound our way along a dirt path heading into the forest. An earthy smell, a blend of mud and wet leaves, hung in the mist around us. We passed a cluster of cottonwoods whose tops were almost tangled with each other. Under their outstretched branches were scattered rocks, jagged and bulky, except for a dove gray rock which was flat and smooth.

We stopped in front of that rock. I hunched over to run my talon along its damp, cool surface.

"Years ago, I found a crying human baby wrapped in a blanket here. I didn't know what to do; I'd never come across anything like that. But I couldn't leave him out here in the forest, so I brought him to the castle. I'm glad I made that decision..." I peered at Acelin, whose eyes were fixed on the rock, and added, "...because that baby was you, Acelin."

His breaths sounded heavier. "Thank you for your kindness." His voice was tight and low, and his hand still clenched around the sword grip.

We strolled forward on the path now lined with wildflowers and shrubs, our steps pounding on the leaf-strewn ground like drumbeats. The path led us out into a clearing, where canopies of willow trees encircled an expanse of tall grass.

"It was right here, where I trained you to become a swordsman. You were skinny and short, unlike me, a giant dragon. But you had talent. I always believed in you, even when you doubted yourself." I chuckled. "But look at you now! All of the training paid off."

Acelin stepped forward, scanning the clearing. For a long moment, he stood rooted as a balmy breeze stirred his russet-colored hair. A spurt of uncertainty flashed in his eyes despite his effort to settle back to a calm demeanor.

We continued on the path sloping toward a rocky mountaintop. Trees and bushes became scattered, allowing sunlight to spill in and sending us a pleasant feeling of warmth.

We reached a meadow dotted with purple snowbell flowers. I slowed my pace and asked, "Do you remember here? This is where you had your accolade when I declared you a knight and bestowed you the kingdom's sacred sword."

Acelin was about to say something but stopped, as if there was a lump lodged in his throat.

"That was the happiest I'd ever seen you. It feels like yesterday. Time flies." My eyes gazed over him while he was lost in thought.

For the rest of the path, we walked in silence until we reached the end, a mossy cliff.

I turned to Acelin and broke the silence. "Acelin, you need to know that I'm willing to give you everything I have. I know you've wanted my crown for a long time and I'm the only obstacle in your way." My voice slightly trembled but I kept it steady. "Don't stain your sword. I can jump off here myself." I managed a weak smile. "You have my blessings."

I stepped to the edge and closed my eyes, saying my last goodbye, when I felt Acelin's arms wrap around me.

"No, don't go! Your Majesty, I don't want you to die." He let the words sink in. "I wouldn't be who I'm today if it weren't for you." He choked between words, tears glinting in his eyes. "Forgive me."

I embraced him in my veined wings. A moment felt like centuries. Then, I said, "Let's go home."

# One Moment

Jordan Brown

**Honorable Mention**, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2021 Young Writers' Contest

Friends School of Baltimore—Baltimore, MD

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"I know you took my acrylics, idiot. Now just give them back before I tell Dad!" she yelled at her brother. He continued stuffing his books in his bag, pretending like he hadn't heard her.

"Come on, Shawn, please. I really gotta finish my painting, so can you just—" Her brother spun around to look at her, his anger almost palpable. "I didn't take your damn paint! Now get out of my room so I can get ready for school." As he started pushing her to the door, she dug her feet into his carpet and closed her eyes.

"Oh no you don't, you freak!" He threw his phone, nailing her on the side of her head. She screamed, collapsing to the floor while clutching her temples. Their father ran in, giving her brother a nasty look.

"What happened!" he yelled as he knelt to comfort her. "She tried to read my mind AGAIN, Dad," her brother groaned. "It's just not fair that she can come into my room and try to listen in on my thoughts to find her stupid little paint when I didn't even do nothing wrong!"

Her father paused for a brief moment, as if weighing the cons and pros of lecturing her brother, then looked at Shawn and asked, "Well, were you wearing that tag your mother gave you?"

Her brother rolled his eyes and yelled, "Oh so it's my fault that I forgot to put on a stupid necklace before I even had time to get dressed so that she"—he pointed at her—"wouldn't read my mind, but it's not her fault for using her freak abilities on me? Yeah don't even pretend that that... that thing didn't deserve more than just a iron phone case to the face. This is why I can't wait to get outta here."

He grabbed his balled-up clothes and pushed past them as he ran out of his bedroom. Her father looked at her and brushed the hair out of her face.

"Hon, you know you aren't supposed to be poking around in people's heads like that. It's just not fair." She sat up, crawled over to his bed and said, "But he doesn't have to be all violent with me and stuff. And besides—" She opened his bedside drawer and stuck her hand in. She felt around the drawer until she pulled out a plastic box. "He stole my paints anyways and God knows what he did with them."

Her father sighed as he got up and extended his hand to her. "You know what you did was wrong, Cal." He scanned her face for a second, unsuccessful in his search for any sign of remorse.

"I just—I just wish you could understand. No one... Cal, its just—" Her father looked down at his shoes and back up at her, softly saying, "You can't just go into people's heads like that. And you know it." He looked down at his watch and let out an uncomfortable sigh. "Better hurry up so you and Shawn aren't late," he exclaimed and kissed her cheek then rushed down the stairs and yelled "Have a good day!" as he ran out the door.



As she pulled up to school, she was greeted with a feeling of dread. She had a pop quiz later that day, which she had found out while “accidentally” listening to her history teacher’s thoughts in class two days earlier. She hated the walk of shame to the holding cell they called the “Special Room.” Normally it was used for specials with strength or other “dangerous abilities,” but the school used it as a testing room for their resident telepath. The worst thing about it was that this was some of the best accommodation any school had given her, seeing as not many superintendents account for the only telepath in the country going to their high school. She found a parking spot close to the main building and backed into it. Her brother looked scared as she tried to parallel park, and he looked at her and said, “Woah, easy now.”

She turned to him and said, “Oh, you think you could do better? Last time I checked I’m the only one with a license. Unlike someone who got a DUI.”

He huffed and shoved out the door the second she stopped the car.

“Well I sure get a lot of thanks for being your fucking chauffeur,” she yelled as she grabbed her stuff and walked to first period as the five minute warning bell rang.

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“Sweetheart, are you sure you are finished?” Principal Hearst asked in her sickly-sweet tone. “Yes, yes I am. Thank you!” she said, handing her her quiz. The principal looked down at her answers, rubbing her iron bracelet. “Well, I’m sure you did great. I don’t need to escort you to class, do I?” “No, ma’am, I know the way,” she said, grabbing her locket and phone from the basket. She made her way back to her history classroom. As she opened the door, she could feel everyone’s eyes on her, and for the brief second she had forgotten to put her locket back on, she heard all the whispering thoughts. Most weren’t full sentences, just snippets of thoughts. It was just like a thousand voices were filling up her head, and it was impossible to cipher through them all. She squeezed her necklace in her palm and put it back on as she sat down. “Everyone try to wrap it up in the next five minutes, please,” Mr. James said.

She stared at her desk and studied all the markings and drawings. In moments like this when she was bored out of her mind, she desperately tried not to listen in on people’s thoughts, but it became so hard sometimes. “Just one person, okay,” she said to herself. She took off her necklace and tried focusing really hard on a random thought. “Where is your necklace, Callie?” he asked. “Oh, I—I’m sorry. Its just—my... iron, it gives me a bad headache and the testing room just makes it worse so...” she stumbled out. She winced as she heard 30 “LALALALALALALALALA”s flood her brain. “Do you need to go to the nurse?” her teacher asked, a sympathetic look on his face. “No,” she said, sinking down in her seat. “You know my sister is special too. Can run the mile in about 30 seconds. I remember back in about ‘89 or was it ‘87...”

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Her favorite thing to do was draw in silence. When you constantly can hear everyone else’s thoughts, silence becomes a necessary pass time. When she painted, she wasn’t a special or anyone at all. She was a tree moving freely in the wind, or the ocean brushing gently on the shore. She felt at peace.

“Cal, are you okay?” Zane said as he walked in. She put her locket on and turned to him. He kissed her forehead and pulled a chair up next to her.

“I didn’t see him in the cafeteria, did you? Is he ditching again? Is that a welt on the side of your head? Calypso, what’s going on?” He searched her eyes for any clarity.

She took a deep breath. "I don't know what's wrong with my brother, Zane. Everyone seems to blame me." Her voice fell to a whisper. "He hit me with his iron phone case. He knows what it does. He knows what he does—" she broke out into an all out sob as she shoved her face into his shirt.

"I don't know what I'm gonna do. How can I... what have I... I'm just the worst. I read his mind... I—I listened to his—without his permission. I'm so terrible to him," she cried." He had no right to hurt you, Cal," he said, wiping her tears. "No right at all."

"It's fine," she said, trying to form a smile. "I'm just happy I have you here to cheer me up," she said, nuzzling her nose into his neck.

"Do you want to go to the cemetery and listen to some last thoughts? My pop just buried Bud Clarrington, God rest his soul, and I know for a fact that he didn't die with iron and wasn't buried with any either."

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"Zane, don't you think this is wrong?" she asked as she knelt by Bud Clarrington's freshly dug grave. "What? No! Besides, who does it harm if we get to listen to the last thoughts of the town wino anyhow?" he said. "Now what's he thinkin'. Or I mean what was he thinkin'?" She put her hand on the ground and listened in hard. Most people she listened in on had been dead for a while, so it was just a muffled string of words or a blurry image. She typically tried to stay away from the young ones like Bud because their last thoughts were a lot more clear and a hell of a lot more jarring. She imagined herself digging through the dirt and into Bud's brain. "I see something!" she gasped. It was dark and Bud was alone.

"Stop it... you... you thieves," he said in a slurred voice. She heard the laughs of what sounded like a group of teenage boys that she recognized. "Gimme back my, my bottle. Shane—Shawn, whatever the hell your name is," he said.

"Shut up you old drunk. Before my pop comes and locks you up for the third time this month," Shawn said as his friends laughed.

"I don't think your daddy and mama would be too keen on knowin' that their boy is out here bein' all sorts a' wild—" Bud stumbled. "And I'll be sure to tell your ALL your parents next time I see em' about all y'all's... Adventures. And you know they'll be fixin' to be tied over all this bullshit, 'specially you Terrence," he said, pointing to her brother. The boys ran off and Bud went to pick up what was left of his stuff.

A few moments later, a hooded figure came back. It was no doubt one of the boys that had taunted him earlier, so Bud started to try to run off, but he was too slow. All that came next was a hard thwack as Bud fell to the floor.

"What did you see, Cal?" Zane asked in a serious voice. "Shawn—he—he, he was there when Bud—" She sat down and stared blankly at the tombstone. That night at the party. Did he leave with anyone?" she desperately asked. "Well yeah, he left with some of the stoners from Tunhill. I asked him to stay but he said they went to get more booze and never came back. I just assumed—"

"Zane—" she said, taking a deep breath. "I think my brother killed Bud."

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The drive to her house was only about twenty minutes. But as she drove home felt like a million years as she grappled with her circumstances. She was the only one who could prove that Bud was murdered. There were no murders in Arcadia. *Bud Clarrington hit his head on a dumpster in an alley and bled to death before anyone could call the authorities. There was no foul play. I mean, who would want him dead? He didn't hurt nobody.* But if she didn't tell anyone, she couldn't live with the guilt. It would be impossible. And she'd seen all those crime shows. The truth always gets out.

She pulled her keys out of her pocket and unlocked the door. "Dad!" she yelled as she hung up her bag and walked into the living room. She yelled for her father one last time and there was no response. She checked her phone and saw a text. It was her dad saying that there was just too much work at the station and to expect him home at 10. Typical. She looked at the TV as the officers launched an iron net on some random criminal. She remembered biology when someone asked why we hate iron so much. Her teacher had said something about our lack of red blood cells or something. Touching iron for some reason triggered a crazy reaction that varied from person to person. As she watched the cops yelling at the man that he had the right to remain silent, she thought about his blood cells. They must've been really confused.

Just as the commercial break started she heard a knock on the door. "Come in Zane! The door is unlocked," she yelled. "How'd you know it was me?" he asked as he jumped on the couch beside her. "Shawn's friends never knock," she said, cuddling up next to him. "You know it ain't safe or smart to leave the door unlocked, 'specially when you are home alone," he said, concerned.

"I only leave the door unlocked when Shawn's out late." She paused as she looked up at him. "And who would be dumb enough to break into an officer's house?" she laughed incredulously

"I know your heart's in the right place but sometimes you act like you ain't got as much sense as a bucket of rocks," he said. "But you're so pretty that you just about make up for it," he said as he kissed her forehead. His face slowly dropped as he remembered the gravitas of the situation.

"I couldn't stop thinking about it. I can't sell out my brother." She took a deep breath. "But I can't do that to Bud. He didn't deserve to die. His only crime was bein' in the wrong place at the wrong time. And I guess public intoxication." She grabbed his hand. "I don't know what to do."

He hugged her. "You'll get through this. I swear. Sometimes the right thing isn't easy. And truth be told, I don't know what the right thing is."

The door suddenly opened as her brother walked in and threw his bag on the floor. "Hey dumbass, you left the door open," he said as he jumped on the couch next to them. "Oh, did I interrupt somethin' here." He chuckled as he put his feet up on the ottoman. The room settled as they sat in an uncomfortable silence. She took in the moment with her brother, as it may have been their last for a long time. She watched him, chuckling with Zane and mocking the guys on the TV. She couldn't imagine how someone could be like him. Ruin their life like that. But now wasn't the time to dwell on the future. She just wanted one last good memory of him.

"What's up, weirdo?" he asked, lightly punching her arm.

"Oh, nothing," she said, looking up at him, "I'm just tryin' to enjoy the moment is all."