

The Night Before Drug

Krisna Kumar

First Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2024 Young Writers' Contest
Friends School—Baltimore, MD

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I gently stroked the purple mascara onto my eyelashes. Rose always said being monochromatic was a bore. Since wearing anything but black might be a little too unorthodox, the mascara would have to do. I sighed and fumbled with the end of my starch skirt. It was starting to get more and more stiff the more I washed it. At least my black heels were broken at this point.

Having to wear them at least ten times in the last month expedited that process.

“Come on, Remi,” my mom’s voice drifted up from below. I took one last glance in the mirror before hurrying downstairs.

The wake itself was quick. After all, there really wasn’t much to say. Greg delivered his eulogy expressing how broken he was after all of this. It wasn’t an open casket so there wasn’t any real need to pay respects. The real ceremony started when the girls between the ages of 12-45 stayed as everyone filed out. My mother had celebrated her 50th months earlier and rushed out with the rest of them. Greg led the parallel group of boys between 12-45 into the nearby room.

Before leaving for college, my brother, Ike, and I had swapped our recollections of the script that would follow.

Welcome ladies! This week’s appointed woman cheerfully read her script.

You know how deeply saddened we are at the recent loss of one of our own. Her tone dipped down a couple octaves and we all bowed our heads in sync. Then, without warning her head snapped up and she clapped twice. She looked so similar to the clapping dolls I used to own.

I felt laughter rising inside of me so I bit my cheek to prevent it from boiling over. To laugh in one of these meetings would be the biggest sin.

However, we must move forward and therefore remind you of the roles we each play in preventing deaths like these.

Out of the corner of my eye I watched as a couple girls, younger than me, shifted uncomfortably. This might be their first time I realized. It’s okay, they’ll learn, we all do.

First, we must understand the circumstances that lead to this death. Let us begin:

After this, the script would deviate each time depending on who died. But, the premise was always the same. Here’s what they said about Rose:

Rose Evergreen was a vibrant girl. And it was this that caused her death. While we of course encourage the joy and exuberance that all young girls must have, Rose’s personality became sporadic and manipulative at times. Her death was, of course, preventable. Let us review therefore where she went wrong.

They then listed everything from her frequent dancing to pop songs to how she was known for sharing snacks on the bus ride home.

Now, I knew this was all insane. There was no way that a girl dancing to a 20 second beat was enough to justify her death. But even if I knew this was insane, it didn’t matter. I didn’t need to expedite my death.

I presume the men heard something more similar to this:

Good Afternoon, gentlemen.

While of course we are gathered here to mourn the loss of one dear to us, we can not overlook the suffering of the living. We yield this space to Gregory, the victim of this situation.

And I presume that Greg would say something like this:

Rose was such a good person, that is, when I first met her. She was beautiful in the way flowers are beautiful. So delicate. I didn't know she changed until well into our relationship. When I would lay in bed with her, she would stop me constantly. But things didn't really change until she told me she was pregnant. Of course I thought we would have a life together. But then she killed it. Without letting me know. My beloved Rose was a murderer. What could I do? She could have come for me next. So in self defense I had to do what was right.

After that, they would again bring up the methods in which men should kill the “murderers”.

I must believe that we all will uphold the law the same way I did. We must kill the “murderers”; we must kill whenever we think it's right. It might be hard at first, but I am here to say that I do not regret my choice. I did the right thing.

At this point, Greg would hold up a packet of the “night before” drug. While generally airborne in small spaces, it can also be added to food or water or entered directly into the bloodstream to shut down an entire nervous system.

This, this is our duty. He would say while displaying the packet to the room. *We accepted this when we were 11, it is our responsibility. Let us never forget our responsibility.*

This is how Rose was killed. Out of a man's *responsibility*.

And it is, I presume, how I will be killed one day too. Of course Rose was an extreme example. She directly committed what now is considered a “crime”. But in general, men release the “night before” drug all the time. My cousin's boyfriend put one in her suitcase after she got drunk with another guy. If you walk too late at night, you can find open packets of it lying on the sides of the road. Hence, don't walk alone at night.

It's not like all men use the “night before” drug. My father throws out the monthly package he gets of them. But still, some men devote their entire lives to the “night before” drug. Some women too. In fact, my aunt died because her best friend released the drug on her in the sauna. I don't even know why it happened. It's not like I can remember every single woman who died. That would be impossible.

* * *

I met him in my second year of college. He was absolutely beautiful. The epitome of tall, dark and handsome. His name was Paul.

Of course I knew I should be careful, but maybe I wanted him to be different. After all, I never saw him carrying the drug with him. In fact, he told me that he didn't even believe in its usage.

He said, “I could never imagine killing a woman I loved.”

To be honest, I was surprised he even referred to it as “killing”; most people call it self-defense—if not just “duty”.

Once when we were laying together, he mumbled that his father had killed his mother and he would never do the same. I believed him. After all, I told myself, even if he did turn out to be just like the

others, I'd never give him a reason to be angry. I wore the clothes he wanted, I let him follow me home every night, I never missed a text message, there was no reason to hate me.

But, I guess, there was.

The first time he tried to use the drug on me, I dodged. Oh, to be clear, dodging won't help against this drug. Obviously. It's an airborne drug, once released the whole room has to be ventilated for hours to remove all traces. And even then, I'm sure we're all breathing in microparticles of the "night before" drug. Just not fatal enough to do anything. But I digress.

I dodged, and by that I mean I got lucky. Paul had put the drug into my water bottle. Very usual method of delivery, and a usually very effective one at that. But I guess some God had decided to bless me. I forgot the water bottle on a park bench because I was too entranced by a bird eating breadcrumbs. It's a fascination of mine, don't judge. The only reason I figured this out was when I heard Paul reporting my "death" to the police. You should have seen his face when I walked through the door. It wasn't hard to take back the report, he's a man of course.

But, either way, surviving a "night before" attempt was not supposed to happen. And yet here I was. After that two second awkward encounter where I was very much alive while my death was being reported, Paul and I had to both pretend like nothing had happened. So every morning, I put my purple mascara on while he dresses in the other room. Then I kiss him goodbye and get on the subway. He goes to work, I go to my mother's house to visit, and we live our normal lives. Which we will keep living for as long as we can.

That is, until he kills me.

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The Quiet Place

Allison Xu

Second Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2024 Young Writers' Contest

Walter Johnson High School—Bethesda, MD

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When I finish my grocery shopping, it is still early to go home and cook dinner. I check my phone messages—five from my husband John and three from my mother-in-law, all about trivial matters. I exhale a heavy sigh and ignore them, at least for now. It wouldn't hurt to stay out a little longer. After stowing the shopping bags in the trunk, I meander along the pavement lined with shops and bakeries, savoring the rare "me" time.

I notice that the toy store at the corner of the plaza has been replaced by a new store adorned with a sign reading The Quiet Place. The storefront has been repainted into a lemon yellow accentuated by white trim. The slope polka-dot window awnings give it a cozy look.

I pace toward the store and push open its spotless glass door, the air inside suffused with sandalwood incense. Wooden display shelves stand on the hardwood floor, carrying colorful bottles with labels.

A lady with caramel hair in a long-sleeve lavender dress emerges from behind the counter and pads over to me.

"Welcome to The Quiet Place!" A smile spreads across her red lips. "What can I help you with?"

"It's my first time here," I reply. "What exactly do you sell?"

"We sell quietness." Her right hand glides through the air as if waving a magic wand. "Or you can say...peace."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

She reaches for an aqua-blue bottle filled with powder and hands it to me. "Here! This is our most popular product."

My eyes are caught by the gold-etched label—Serenity. "Who wouldn't want a moment of Serenity?" the lady says. "But sometimes we simply can't keep the noise of others away. The powder inside this bottle will keep a person from making any sound for two hours."

I flick my eyebrows up. "Really? How does it work?"

"Just mix it with water—simple, isn't it? Or whatever that person drinks, milk, juice, anything! Totally tasteless, so the other person never knows."

"Any side effects?"

"Absolutely not! It does what it's supposed to do."

I think of my four-year-old son. I can never get a break from his constant tantrums and meltdowns. How wonderful would it be if he could stop crying and whining for two hours?

"So, if I use this, there's no crying? No whining?" I ask. "None for two hours," she answers.

My eyes widen. I clasp the bottle tighter in my palm. "What else do you have?" I ask.

She leads me toward another section of the shelf and retrieves a rusty-orange bottle. "You might want this one too, dear. It deals with complainers—it keeps them from complaining for 24 hours."

As she passes the bottle labeled Bliss to me, a tinge of excitement rises in me. John is such a big complainer. How come I didn't sense that before I married him? Whenever he talks to me, he's always grumbling and making a fuss about his boss, colleagues, clients, and everyone else. I'm so sick of it. This bottle would be perfect for him.

"I want it," I reply. My eyes continue to roam toward other bottles on the shelves.

Gesturing with her hand, the lady guides me to another shelf and picks a rouge-pink bottle from the left end. "This one is my favorite." She peers at my face for a brief second. "If there's anyone in your life who keeps rambling on and on, that would drive you crazy, right?"

I nod while my mind drifts to my mother-in-law, who lives with us. Every day, she babbles about her past and educates me on how things should be done like in the old days.

The lady hands me the bottle labeled Tranquility and her fingers gently pat the back of my hand as a little comfort. "This is a solution. It stops a person from rambling for eight hours."

I look at her appreciatively and cup the three bottles in my hands. Their colors glimmer in the soft light from the ceiling. "I want these three," I say.

"Great!" she says brightly. "Remember to use only one teaspoon each time. Don't overdo it."

"Got it. How much for these?"

"It's on us. You are one of our first customers."

After thanking the lady, I head out toward my car. As I insert the key into the ignition, my phone rings. It's from my mother-in-law.

"Owen's crying like crazy and keeps calling for his mom! Come back home, quickly!"

Her shrill voice sends a flush of annoyance through me. I almost yell out the anger bubbling in my chest. But when the three bottles on the passenger seat come into sight, an appeased feeling slips into me.

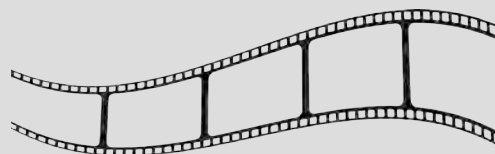
"Sure, I'll be home soon," I reply in a cool, gentle voice, rubbing fingers over the pink bottle of Tranquility. I can't help smiling at the thought that I'll finally have all the quietness I need.

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Honorable Mention:

Como Cada Jueves (Like Every Thursday)—J. M. Asensio (Spain)

A Timeless Issue

Liam Foley

Tie for Third Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2024 Young Writers' Contest
Friends School—Baltimore, MD

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There were about a million of us. They had discovered some stupid way to create something from nothing, some god awful glitch in the universe, and now about a million of us were stuck here for god knows how many thousands of years. They made some piece-of-junk cellular implants to make people that came back no matter what hit them, and then they thrust the whole goddamn planet into a nuclear winter. We tried to gather into a civilization, hence why I can talk to all these people I'm gonna tell you about, but that collapsed after a couple thousand years when nature as we know it basically came to an end and we all got bored out of our skulls. But enough backstory, let me tell you about these four weirdos who gave me hope.

I was in this big, snowy place when I heard the sound of something colliding with cement. I looked around for a couple minutes, and finally found a fat and muscular man slamming his fists against a dam. I told him something in French that I'd rather not repeat here, but the moron didn't even know French. After some trial and error, I found he spoke some decent English, so we went with that. He spoke in this cheery tone and said "care to join me?" I asked him what on god's not-so-green earth he was doing, and Captain Obvious said he was punching a wall.

"*Why* are you punching that wall?"

"Boredom, brother. Same reason we do everything else"

He brutally slammed his fists against the dam, breaking his fingers and spraying blood everywhere again and again, his hands quickly reforming so that he could continue. All the while, he had this stupid grin on his face, and he kept laughing. Suddenly, he threw up his arms and screamed at the top of his lungs.

"ALL THE WALLS ARE GOING TO BE DUST! I WILL MAKE THEM THAT!"

If you somehow can't tell what he did next, he laughed and continued to punch the dam. I looked around and saw four or five big dents in it.

"How long have you been doing this?" I asked.

He paused.

"Could be ten years, could be hundred years. I do not know. I just know I must punch wall."

"Is this really reasonable?"

"Nothing has reason, brother. If we want meaning, it comes from lies. Only peoples can tell these lies. We can love; we have ideals. If we want meaning, we make meaning."

"So you're one of those absurdists?"

"The absurdists reject meaning. They rebel against the fact there is no meaning, but acknowledge it is there. I tell the lies that make me happy and give me meaning."

I told him he was a stupid sack of meat, and he had the audacity to laugh. Then I left him to his wall-punching.

"Come punch wall with me sometime!"

A decade or so later, I was wandering around this big desert, and I was sweating like crazy, so I stopped to rest. It was then that I saw this big plume of smoke, so I naturally approached it. The closer I got, the

more a rancid stench filled my nostrils. Eventually, I saw someone peacefully sitting down with their eyes closed as their flesh kept melting and burning off.

“There’s something on you,” I said, not having seen fire in thousands of years.

“So there is,” said a croaky, inhuman voice.

“I think it’s... fire. And it’s clearly damaging your vocal chords.”

The burning figure looked at me with melted eyes.

“Yes, I am on fire. And no, I will not do anything about it.”

It was at this point that an awkward silence fell for about a minute. It made me pretty uncomfortable, but they seemed unfazed. Unfazed by the silence, unfazed by the fire, unfazed by everything. It was almost as if they were asleep.

“I know that most of the planet is desert now, but I feel like you could be doing something more productive with your time,” I said.

They looked up at the sky. “There is not.”

“Why’s that?”

“Nothing is productive.”

Night was beginning to fall, and it was getting very cold. While pain didn’t mean much anymore, I instinctually got closer to the fire. For a while I just sat there, looking at their bones become charred, their fat melt off, and their skin become disfigured. It was revolting, but I couldn’t stop looking at their body regenerate only to be destroyed again by the blazing flames. I looked down at my hands and observed how the fire illuminated my skin. The smoke made me cry a little. In spite of it all, I felt a strange sense of calm by the fire.

“This place is already hell, and you decide to just sit there while you’re on fire?”

“There is no hell.”

“I can’t even remember my name. I can go months without seeing anyone. Most of the time I just wander aimlessly. This is hell.”

“There is no hell. There is no heaven. There is nothing.”

“What are you talking about?”

“To say that there is a purpose to our lives is folly. There is no inherent logical property of the universe saying that some things are good and some things are bad. Things just happen. This world is devoid of a goal. And you know what?”

“What?”

“I accept this. So I just sit here.”

“That’s depressing.”

“That is just your intrinsically irrational desires speaking to a brain programmed to survive and breed.”

“We’re all sterile, and you’re an absolute lunatic. I’m out of here.”

Although I spoke to them with scorn, I couldn’t help but feel a strange affection for the fiery stranger. I was not so affectionate towards this next person, mainly on account of her being more insane than the last two combined.

I was visiting the ruins of the civilization we all formed after the war when a rock smashed into my head. I looked around, searching for the source, only to be hit by another rock. After several rocks had hit me, I finally found a woman with wild hair and a pile of rocks.

“Why are you throwing rocks at me?” I asked.

“I FELT LIKE IT,” responded the woman.

“Why are you shouting?”

“I FEEL LIKE DOING THAT TOO.”

She looked like she had just come out of a cave to hunt mammoths. While I somewhat politely tried to speak to her, she just tried to stack the rocks and got very upset whenever the towers fell.

“So... what’s that?” I said, pointing to a trash can with a crude smiley face carved into it.

“THAT IS A TRASH CAN. IT IS NAMED HERBERT.”

It didn’t seem like there was a single way to touch the trash can that wouldn’t give me tetanus.

“I HAVE BEEN CARING FOR THIS TRASH CAN FOR THE LAST HUNDRED YEARS,” she said.

I paused to process the sheer stupidity of that information. The trash can did not survive the pause in our conversation, as the woman tackled the trash can, kicked it for about a minute, and jumped on it until it had been flattened.

“Why did you *do* that?” I said.

“I want to be quiet now,” she said.

“Why are you doing these insane things?”

“Life is just insane things. And I like it that way.”

“Please do tell me about your outlook on the meaninglessness of existence.”

“There is no meaning, and that is fine. I will use that to live life how I want to. I will reject the sameness of the days by plunging my life into chaos. I do what I want to, and I’m happier that way.”

“I’m not happy that you threw rocks at me.”

“Just be happy, no matter what.”

In response to this asinine advice, I began to take my leave. As I was walking out, she called to me. “Wait,” she said.

“What?”

“Nothing, I just wanted to see what would happen.”

Finally, I found myself in a gray place. The sky was gray, and the level ground was covered in ash. I was simply walking when I saw a figure in a black cloak. It was the first time I had seen clothing in forever. I could barely recall the name of what they were wearing. I asked them who they were, and they said, “My name is not important. Just know that they called me Aleph.” Their voice seemed to be made of a hundred other voices, all speaking in unison, echoing like they were in a cave.

“Aleph...” I said. The name seemed familiar.

“I was born with a gift. My cells would regenerate from nothing. Humanity harnessed this gift, and their machines and medicine became greater than ever before,” they said.

I recognized them now. They were the first immortal, and they had started the final technological revolution. *Creatio Ex Nihilo* was the term they used. They wanted us to know that Aleph was god.

“I’m so sorry that they used your gift to pull others into your hell.”

“Perish the thought,” they said, “I personally oversaw the creation of the immortals.”

“What?”

“I begot all men eternal. And so I begot you.”

“What?” I couldn’t believe it. I was ready to beat them to a bloody pulp. “Why?” I said, “Why do this to us? Why create us?”

“The answer is unimportant,” they said. “You already know that no one has the right to give things purpose. No one has the right to do anything. There is no meaning in this world.”

“Then why? Why do we have to suffer like this?”

“Have you no gratitude for your humanity? We have things that nothing else ever had. We have love and ideals and creativity. The universe did not want us, earth did not want us, evolution did not want us, yet man exists all the same. Our glorious existence is an act of rebellion.”

“I don’t want to rebel. I want to submit. Please.”

Aleph was quiet now. After some deliberation, they beckoned me, and I followed them. After walking through the ash for a couple of minutes, I saw something incredible. The closer I got, the more I was in disbelief. It was a tree.

It was beautiful. Its leaves were a color I had forgotten the name of, and its trunk was brown and shriveled. For the first time since the nukes dropped, I cried. I reached out to touch it, but Aleph stopped me.

“That tree is your escape. It hijacks your cellular implants to replace your cells with tree cells. When you touch that tree, you will die.”

“If you can do this, why not kill us all?” I asked.

“I wanted to give you a choice.”

“I understand.”

“So then,” said Aleph, “what will you choose?”

**BSFS Congratulates the Winners of the Jack L. Chalker
2024 Young Writers’ Contest**

First Place

“The Night Before Drug”

Krisna Kumar

Friends School—Baltimore, MD

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Second Place

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Walter Johnson School—Bethesda, MD

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Tied for Third Place

“A Timeless Issue”

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“The Sister Paradox”

Ellie Xu

Walt Whitman High School—Bethesda, MD

.....

Honorable Mention

“The Mechanic”

Kalina Peterson

Thomas S. Wootton High School—Rockville, MD

.....

Honorable Mention

“The Fulfillment”

Tara Foley

Saints Peter & Paul High School—Easton, MD

.....

The Sister Paradox

Ellie Xu

Tie for Third Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2024 Young Writers' Contest

Walt Whitman High School—Bethesda, MD

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The question renowned physicist Ron Marshall always got about his work was the Bootstrap Paradox, where a person or object being sent back in time created an infinite time loop, with no observable origin of the person or object. Like in Robert Heinlein's story, "By His Bootstraps." The main character copied something down from an old notebook, but the old notebook was actually his copy the whole time. So where did the original writing on the notebook come from?

This was something he could never make sense of, and he found himself returning to that theme, over and over again in his scientific papers and talks. Plus, it was Mary's favorite time travel paradox, back when she was a physics student with him in university.

"It just doesn't make sense," seventeen-year-old Susanna repeated, head resting on her hands, trying to make sense of it all. Her younger sister Olivia, fourteen and a rebellious teenager, squirmed in her chair, anxious to get on the phone and chat with her friends. The three of them were sitting at the dinner table. Even six years after Mary died, it felt wrong and empty. Ron had to go on endless rants on time travel and physics to prevent the conversation from drifting away into oblivion.

"Time travel never really does make sense, huh?"

"I think it's stupid," Olivia interjected, stabbing her green beans with her fork. "Theories are so useless. Like, why don't you go build a time machine and test it out, huh?"

Ron shrugged. "Huh, you're right. Why don't I?"

There was a little gleam in his eye when he said that, like he knew something they didn't, and he intended on keeping it that way.

* * *

The question Ron Marshall always got about his life was his daughter Susanna. What happened to her that night, when she vanished, disappearing without a trace? Did she run away? Was she kidnapped? Was she murdered?

Ron Marshall loved to theorize, but he couldn't figure this out. Not just because it hurt, losing another family member, but because he had no idea. He always took safety precautions, to the extremes, with a camera by every door and every window. Any possible entrance to the house was monitored. Not a single person could have left or entered that house.

The police went crazy. They tore down every wall, insisting Susanna must be somewhere in the house. But they couldn't find her. They checked everywhere, but the only lead they had to something being amiss was Olivia's testimony; her swear that she heard a loud crash, and the voice of an unfamiliar, thirty-something woman. Ron didn't hear it, so he must have been asleep when it happened. Eventually, the police dismissed it as a teenage girl hearing things, being paranoid, or doing it for attention.

Just thinking about what could have happened to Susanna made Ron sick to his stomach. So he didn't dwell on it. He let the police do their job. If it came to it, if no one found an answer, he had a backup plan. But seeing Olivia, all fragile and broken-down like that, he could only imagine what would

happen if he failed and the plan went haywire like it most likely would. She had already lost two family members. What if she lost him, too? She'd be an orphan, all alone, with no one to hold on to. So he kept quiet and he kept still, praying that one day, everything would click into place and life would be fine again.

* * *

The question Olivia Marshall always wondered was, how in the world do you find a girl who's been missing for over twenty years? Trick question: that's impossible. Instead, you find your father's old time machine and travel back in time to save her.

Sometimes the simplest solution is the best one.

The police never figured it out: who did it, where Susanna was, what happened to her. It remained an unsolved case, buried at the bottom of a cabinet. The media never gave up though, with people all over the country playing detective and trying to solve the mystery themselves. They had terrible ideas: that Ron had a fight with Susanna and killed her. That Olivia did it, jealous of the nonstop attention she was getting.

Ron had never tried that hard to investigate, which Olivia would've found a little suspicious, if he hadn't died of heart complications two months ago, induced by stress and grief. They were one tragic family, weren't they? Dead mother, missing daughter, dead father. And Olivia, the last of the bloodline, wasn't much either. Never the favorite daughter, not then, not now. Competing with a dead girl was impossible. She felt like a bunch of broken glass shards, barely held together. It was only a matter of time before she fell apart too. And now, at age thirty-four, all she had was a house filled with secrets to explore.

She didn't remember much about her conversations with her father back in the day, before everything was strained small talk and reminiscing about Susanna. But she recalled him constantly talking about time travel. Oh, and did she forget to mention? He had a time machine. This she knew for a fact. She'd snuck into his study before, as a dare from her friends, since he never let anyone enter, and she saw something, a mysterious cylinder at the very back, buried behind stacks of papers and cardboard boxes.

She didn't think much of it at the time. She just thought of it as another one of his weird crafts. But now, twenty years later, she remembered small things clearly, like that twinkle in his eyes when she mentioned a time machine at dinner once, many years ago.

That was his secret, wasn't it? Then why hadn't he tried to go back and save Susanna?

Obviously, in the back of her head, she knew why. A time machine was unheard of. There was no precedent to follow. To use that time machine, however desperate you were, could be signing a death sentence. And Ron decided he had more to live for: he still had another daughter, friends, things to explore.

But not Olivia. She was unemployed, getting fired from every job for being too unmotivated, too unreliable, too flakey. She was living off of the will and her story, which garnered a few pennies now and then off her GoFundMe page. She was too tragic, too sad, too depressing for her so-called friends to stick around. So, she spent her days alone and cooped-up in her old room. All because Susanna was gone. Funny, wasn't it? Olivia never thought she'd miss Susanna when she went off to some Ivy League college, but it turned out they were a little more bonded than she thought. Susanna might've been the one presumed dead, but Olivia lost her life too, in a different way.

And now she stood in front of a massive black cylinder, plugged into the wall, dusty but other than that, completely the same as when she last saw it. She swung the door open before she could stop herself,

revealing the inside: just a cushioned yellow seat and a bunch of exposed wires that looked like a hazard, connected to buttons on a control panel on the inside of the door.

She'd never had any impulse control, ever. Even when she turned twenty-five, the age when your brain was supposed to fully develop, she still made decisions on a whim. Just like now, with nine years of a fully developed brain. Because this was what she'd wanted for years now. Twenty years, and she wasn't going to back out now.

* * *

The question that ran through Olivia Marshall's head right then, at that exact moment, as she traveled back in time, twenty years into the past, to the exact night when everything was lost, was what was her plan once she made it? Why hadn't she even planned for this? All she knew was she had to keep Susanna safe and in her sights, without alerting anyone of her presence. And now, she had no choice but to wing it, like she always did, only this was a life or death situation. The stakes were a little higher than some math test.

It felt like a flash. A quick flash, a loud bang in her head, a feeling like she had just been electrocuted, only she wasn't sure if that was really what it felt like, since she'd never been electrocuted. And, just like that, she sat upright, still in the time machine. She felt dizzy and her head spun at a million miles an hour, and she felt nauseous in a way she never had before. The air felt stifling and wrong, burning her nostrils when she inhaled.

She stayed inside for a bit, regaining her senses. If she'd done it right, it should be late at night, so Ron was already in bed, away from his study, meaning the coast was clear and she could leave the time machine. That is, if it actually worked, and didn't just electrocute her. She reached out blindly, until she felt the door, and she pushed it open, letting the moonlight outside the windows flood in. She blinked, taking a few moments to register where she was. She was still in Ron's study, in the same spot, and for a moment, panic rose in her chest, thinking the time machine hadn't worked. The study was almost identical, but when she looked closer, something had definitely changed. There were fewer papers and fewer things written on the chalkboards. He was less obsessive back then.

She'd made it.

She also knew this was the past because Susanna stood five feet away from her, frozen, eyes wide, the book she was taking from Ron's bookshelf falling to the ground with a loud crash that shook the whole house. She wasn't supposed to be here. Ron never let anyone go into his study, ever. Not even his favorite daughter. She was sneaking in to read his books.

"Mom?" the girl croaked out.

Susanna became even more horrified when she realized it wasn't a hallucination of her dead mother. Rather, it was a woman she had never seen before, standing in her house in front of a strange machine. Olivia stared right back at her, just as terrified. She hadn't planned for how it would feel to see her sister right in front of her, alive and breathing, just like she'd last seen her.

Susanna snapped out of her shock. She jumped back, opening her mouth to scream. Fear took over Olivia, alarm bells going off in her brain.

"Shut up," Olivia hissed, lunging forward and putting her hand around Susanna's mouth. She resisted, but Olivia was bigger, taller, stronger. And somehow, she knew exactly what to do, as if her brain had just finished developing during that trip on the time machine. She was a girl possessed. There was only one place she could put the kicking and screaming girl in without alerting the rest of the house. She punched in random buttons on the door, trying to send Susanna as far away from her,

as far away from now, as possible. Fifty years into the future, that sounded nice. She kicked the door closed, Susanna inside, protesting and banging on the door and begging for help, but no one could hear her. Panic rose in Olivia's chest, and she dropped to her knees, inhaling and exhaling sharply, until the commotion inside went silent.

She didn't want to move. She wanted to lie here forever, and forget all her worries and everything that had just happened. But she remembered where she was and what could happen if someone found her, so she got up, slowly at first, then quicker and more frantically, her whole body shaking. Her fingers crashed into the buttons, smashing down on them, trying to send her away, away, away. She set it to about thirty years before she collapsed into the seat and swung the door closed, desperate to leave. She felt sick to her stomach.

What had she just done? Who was she?

* * *

The question Olivia Marshall would always wonder for the rest of her life was, what happened if your sister disappeared, so you went back in time to save her, and caused her disappearance? But if you only made her disappear because she disappeared in the first place, how would that work? It was like the paradox Ron was always telling them about: the Bootstrap Paradox. She'd always refer to it as the Sister Paradox, from now on.

The media would have a feast tonight. The missing girl finally found in the middle of her family's old house, fifty years later, the rest of her family gone, only she was the exact same age as when she disappeared. She would tell them what happened, that she was kidnapped by a random woman who forced her into a time machine in her father's office. Then they'd find the time machine. They'd seize it, do whatever they wanted with it: use it for scientific exploration, or destroy it before it caused any more damage. They'd get someone to do a sketch of the woman's face and they'd match it to Susanna's younger sister, Olivia Marshall, but that couldn't be possible, because she disappeared thirty years ago. But really, she'd been living off the grid in the middle of nowhere in Montana for twenty years, with a new name, new face, and new life, watching from a distance as the world went crazy again over the unsolved mystery of the Marshalls. But this time, she held the keys to the answers.

It was funny, how Olivia, the only one in her family who hated science, was the one who brought a time travel paradox to life. It was funny, how Susanna was benefiting the most from her own disappearance, with a real, happy life to live. It was funny, how Olivia felt okay about it all. Hopeful, even. Because unlike before, she wasn't alone, even if she felt like it. She had a sister out there, alive, her heart beating. They were still connected, even after everything that happened. She didn't think she'd ever talk to Susanna again, or let her know she was out there somewhere. She didn't want to make their lives any worse than she already had. She was sorry, and she regretted it. Every single day, every breath she took, every living minute of her life, she regretted it. But she always took a look at the new life she had built from ashes, and reminded herself that sometimes, you didn't have free will. Some things were meant to happen, not because it was fate, but because they already did.

About the Winners of the Jack L. Chalker 2024 Young Writers' Contest



First Place: **Krisna Kumar** is a graduating senior at Friends School of Baltimore who will be attending Johns Hopkins University in the fall. She enjoys writing and usually writes humor or poetry. She does enjoy some sci fi novels, especially with fantasy elements. She especially loves books by Marissa Meyer, a popular YA author. She is very excited to be here tonight and thankful for this opportunity.



Second Place: **Allison Xu** is a high school student from Rockville, Maryland. She is the 2023 Youth Poet Laureate of Montgomery County. Her poetry and short stories have been published in *Blue Marble Review*, *Polyphony Lit*, *The Daphne Review*, *Paper Lanterns*, and more. Her work has been recognized by the *New York Times*, Scholastic Arts & Writing Awards, Bluefire Creative Writing Contest, Kay Snow Writing Contest, etc. When she's not writing, she enjoys reading, baking, and playing with her beagle.



Third Place (Tie): **Liam Foley** is in 10th grade at Friends School of Baltimore. He previously attended Calvert School. Liam is interested in math, science, ornithology, and computers. In his free time, Liam enjoys reading, writing, listening to music, spending time at the beach, and volunteering at Paul's Place in Southwest Baltimore. Some of his favorite books are *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams and *The Book Thief* by Marcus Zusak.



Third Place (Tie): **Ellie Xu** is a 9th grade student in high school. Ever since she was young, she loved writing, even if her 1st-grade spelling tests seemed to say otherwise. Her dad is a scientist, so science has always been of her interests too! She is so grateful to have been selected for this contest and hopes everyone has a good time!

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Some BSFS and Balticon panels and presentations are available to view on the BSFS/Balticon YouTube channel (youtube.com/c/BaltimoreSciFi/videos). The recordings will contain automatically generated captions. You can also view videos from previous Balticons.

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