

ZION

Jaylin Jones

Second Place—Short Story Competition

Zion's hands were ice, even in his pockets, but Chicago winters had gnawed through layers and bone alike for as long as he lived in the city. He'd been out here for hours, just sitting on the sidewalk and letting his thoughts settle. The slush and snow that had piled in the street kept him company while his body froze. Breathing deep, he watched the night air enter and exit, breaking into crystals of ice that caught fire under the streetlights. He smiled and wondered what he'd prefer: going home for dinner or resting here and watching his mouth make stars? It wasn't an easy decision, but he got up and pointed his face to the sky. Today's flakes were already falling, soon to become tomorrow's ammunition. Maybe snowmen, too, standing guard with sticks and stone-sight. Zion chose to run, singing some 60's groove while he brought heat back to his toes. It was a little tune his Grandma sang to his sister when she was still little, and he never lost the sound, not even after he lost her.

When the night has come

And the land is dark

And the moon is the only light we'll see

No I won't be afraid

Oh, I won't be afraid

Just as long as you stand, stand by me

It was Christmas break, which meant a few days of freedom buried under a couple inches of snow. For most, it was time to spend with friends or video games, but Zion just had his family. He spent his evenings helping Mama work her miracles in the kitchen, seasoning and stirring right behind her while she cast her spells. He let his little sister run him around, too, either aching his back or chasing him on her chubby little legs. Hide-and-seek was their favorite. He'd send up a fake sneeze while hiding behind furniture or have his best falsetto scream hang in the air whenever he disappeared around a corner. She played with his old toys in their room most days, sitting on the bed while algebra homework gave him headaches. Things were good.

So why was he going to die soon?

Zion came into the apartment and shut the door, smiling with dark lips and frost on his cheeks. He could tell that he'd made the right choice earlier from the smell. Mama was cooking fish, and the soft sizzle of fat melting in the fryer was music to his ears. She might as well have been Mozart, leaning to the side as she layered flour over what she got for half-off at the corner store. There was a gentle warmth to the apartment that felt amazing in winter, the way it crept into his chest and smoothed the goosebumps on his arms and neck.

"You're late. I told you six o' clock, boy."

He winced a little. He could feel Ma give him the "look" even with her back turned, and it never failed to freeze him quicker than winter ever could.

"Sorry. I lost track of time. Snow's pretty. Might be a lot more soon."

She was quiet for a minute. He could feel her sitting on a lecture, weighing her words. Not like he didn't deserve one, coming in after an hour in 31-degree weather.

"Uh huh. Go wash up, and don't make no noise. I just got Tamara sleep. Dinner gon' be ready soon."

He let out the breath he didn't notice he was holding.

"Yes, ma'am."

The sidewalk was nice, but Zion did his best thinking in his room. He tried to think less these days, but here, he couldn't run from it. This was where it started, after all. They found out a few months ago, back in July. He'd spent the end of summer in bed, moving less and sleeping more. It was small stuff at first, just long naps and less junk food, but it got worse soon. After three nights of just nibbling at dinner, Ma decided they were going to the doctor, and that was that. They went and were at the hospital a week after. Two more weeks of waiting for results, and he sat in a sterile room with white doves on the ceiling. It was serious, some long word he couldn't pronounce. It sounded made-up, like

what a cartoon character would come down with. But it was real, a problem with his genetics. A “one-in-a-million, what are the chances” kind of condition that was just static in his ears as the doctor described it. Even with his eyes drifting up to watch the doves, he could see Ma’s heart breaking as she nodded her head and took notes, her hands shaking while she fought back tears.

He didn’t like to remember it. He never asked for the specifics after, and Ma didn’t tell him either. He knew what he needed to already. Either he didn’t have long, or he could go any time. He’d make the most of it, in his own way.

“Zion! Tamara! Come eat!”

But he’d have to worry about that later.

It was Sunday, and that meant church. Before, Zion would be on his feet every time the pastor gave the cue, clapping and singing while Mama and Tamara were next to him throwing their hands up. It made everything better. Now, the choir song sounded different. It was smooth but strong and suffocating, and the notes got stuck in his throat as he sang along, dragging his head lower and slowing whatever hymn ran from his lips to a muffled hum.

He fought hard against it, but it was a losing battle. He was somewhere else, drifting in and out while the world turned to noise.

It was peaceful, endless. He imagined that if heaven was real, it’d feel like a long nap in a church pew, with warm light pouring over him through stained glass. All until he felt the bite of Ma’s fingers nipping at his neck and his eyes flung open.

She had been letting a lot of things go recently, but sleeping in church was her last straw. Not even Tamara had that privilege, not since she could talk. Zion was on lockdown for a week, although the only thing she did was take away his phone.



Infinite Immunity to Pain

Gracie Rowland

Other media

It was fine. It gave him time to think.

He remembered his grandma’s funeral. He was much younger then, and an open-casket was confusing. She’d been sick, and during his visits she had looked smaller and more distant, like her mind had gone somewhere else and her body was struggling to catch up. But she looked beautiful there, her eyes shut in her Sunday best, looking just like she did when she held his hand and marched him up the pews to pray. She was just sleeping, she had to be.

But she wasn’t. He learned what death meant that day, and it raised a lot of questions he accepted that he couldn’t answer. Maybe that was the point, the questions. He didn’t have those answers yet, but he decided he would before the end.

Zion moved from his bed to his desk, took a pen and a notepad, and started writing. This was how he would make the most of what was left. △