

Neon Spirit

by Tyler Nelson

Neon is a young delinquent with a unique way of getting away with things. However, as of late, he's finding that it's a slippery slope. The further he goes, the more he loses touch with reality.

A strong scent begins to seep into my nostrils. Something must be breaking my concentration. Aside from us, there's no noise. No one else is around either, which is why I chose this street corner. But for some reason...It's Duke.

"Can you calm down?" I hiss at him. His bad nerves were spreading to me, distracting me.

"Sorry, man." He takes a deep breath.

One of the other two—I think his name is Bryce—makes an exaggerated sigh and covers his nose. "You said that stuff wasn't gonna smell. But here we are, smelling it."

"We aren't supposed to. If I can concentrate, that is." I mutter that last part under my breath.

"Wrap it up already. I'm bored. And it's trash anyway."

I review my work. It definitely isn't bad. I put too much effort into it for that. "I'm almost done. We can go smoke in a minute, addict." Bryce frowns, bothered by what I said. He never told me he wanted to smoke. I set down the paint in my hand and grab another color to add the finishing touches. Or I try. Either it's being rushed by someone I hardly know or Duke's anxiety creeping back up on me, but powerful paint fumes flow through my windpipe and I have a coughing fit.

When I can breathe again, I snap, "I told you to calm down! No one's going to catch us."

"I'm sorry! My mama's been crazy, man. They said 'Cause she's got a baby in the oven."

A baby in the oven. "Duke, I don't think that's what they said."

"Whatever. If she finds out I'm not at school, I'm bottled water packaging."

Travis, who's been at the wall spraying on a smiley face, turns around. "You're...what?"

I chuckle, stealing my focus and continuing my work. "She's still at that plant, Duke?" I ask absent-mindedly.

"Yeah. She was gonna quit but they gave her a promotion or something."

"Mmm."

The last thing is to add another highlight to the edge of the 'n.' No one is coming yet. At this time of day, this block is pretty much dead. To my right, Travis gives his smiley face spiky teeth. Behind me, Bryce nudges Duke and points at my back. There's this ugly grin on his face. He shakes a can of paint and sprays something on me, but I pretend not to notice.

When I'm done with my 'n,' I drop my can in my bag. "This jacket's expensive," I say. Whatever he drew, I take my hand and wipe it off of my back leaving behind spotless fabric. He isn't so amused anymore; just confused. My hoodie is fine. No harm no foul, right? Except he didn't know I could do that. "I have a better place for it." Our eyes lock as I wipe the paint from my hand down the front of his shirt.

Duke, in Duke's fashion, feels the tension and tries to break it. "It is cold this morning. He just thought you could use a coat." In another situation I'd have laughed.

Bryce flares his nostrils. "Ay, don't touch me," he grunts, shoving me back into the wall. In that instant, I hear a can clatter on the ground beside me. Before Travis can lunge at him, I grab his wrist. There's no time to fight. Someone is finally coming.

I motion to Duke and he steps towards us past Bryce, who's stupefied. "Man, what the..." He looks up down and all around, but we're nowhere in sight. Finally, he grabs a can and goes to my drawing on the wall. He has to finish this painting.

"Hey!" Calls the patrolman who just rounded the corner.

"Huh?" Bryce lets go of the can. "No. I wasn't...It was him. They were right here." Normally, someone like him would run, but he's too confused because he wasn't so guilty a second ago. I can hardly keep from laughing.

"It's okay, big guy." The cop takes him by the arm. "You don't have to plead insanity. You're only going to the station, not prison. You're lucky you're young. Vandalism is serious."

"It wasn't me, though."

"There's nobody else here, kid." The patrolman drags Bryce off to wherever he left his car along with all my paint. We listen for the sound of him driving away.

Duke chortles once the coast is clear. "Those worms on your head wiggle when you do that stuff."

"You could have hidden him too, right?" Travis asks. I nod.

"Neon, you shouldn't mess with him like that. I heard he has a gun," Duke warns.

"So? What's he gonna do, shoot me?"

"Yeah. Nobody realizes shooting people is bad until they have a gun at someone's forehead. That's what my mama says.

"I do. You do. I'll be fine. He can't be *that* stupid." Oddly, what matters to me more is whether he was right about my painting. I think they call it throw-up. "So, what do you think, Travis?"

"You should be careful who you pick fights with. Dude is huge, and you're so small."

First of all, no one told him to try and fight back. Second of all, "I was talking about the...throw-up."

He scrunches his nose. "Throw-up? Where? ...Oh,That. It's good, I guess. How are they supposed to tell you did it?" I assume that last part is sarcasm. It's just my name written in bombastic letters with neon paint. It isn't art, but then again, I'm not an artist.

...

The Sun is low in the sky when I darken my own doorstep. I split from Duke and Travis a while ago and spent the rest of the time by myself. It was boring. At one point, I thought about going back to school, but sneaking onto the campus wasn't worth the effort.

I'm reaching for my key when the door unlocks and opens in front of me. A blast of pure anger blows over me like a gust of wind. Its source is Aunt Blythe. "Were you hanging around with them crusty inner-city kids again?!"

I wince. "I—

"Don't lie, cause I know you weren't at school." She stands fuming while she waits for an answer. I give her a little bit because she's prone to interrupting when she's like this.

"Who said—

"I told your stupid ass if you skipped school again you were sleeping in the shed. Now, I asked you a question."

...

There's only one way to handle this. "I was hanging out with those crusty inner-city kids."

She relaxes and softens her words. "Oh...okay. Good."

"And I did skip school. Being there makes me sick. But not as sick as you make me." She smiles and nods. "And I'm not sleeping in the shed. I'm not sure what's dumber; the fact that you thought of that, or that you thought I would do it."

"Of course not, babe."

I smile back at her. "Can I come inside? It's cold out here, you dumb cow." She moves aside so I could enter the foyer. My footsteps echo throughout the empty halls. "Who told you I wasn't at school?"

"Some little girl called here for you. Her name was some exotic crap. She said you got an assignment together."

"An assignment? ...Oh, right."

I have an assignment for my chemistry class. I forgot who my partner was and was ignoring her and the work for two weeks. And she was keen on letting me know it. I called her back after Blythe nagged me about it. I couldn't argue back much or else she'd remember she was supposed to be mad at me.

Her name is Gila. I had to finagle it out of her without giving away that I forgot it. She didn't consider it fair if I got credit and she did all the work, so she called. Had to pull out a phone book of all things. The plan is for her to come over tomorrow afternoon so we can work on it. I was honest with her; I didn't feel like moving this weekend, so she offered to.

Now, I'm sitting in my room watching my parents do busy work throughout the house. Mom is in the kitchen cooking food I'm never gonna eat. She looks much too small to be alone in such a big room. The food smells delicious though. Dad's in his office scrubbing a wine stain out of the carpet. He looks anxious to get back to his computer. It must be important.

The doorbell rings and Mom answers the door to Gila. I had forgotten what she looked like. Earlier today I was wondering—trying to remember. She's cute. At least enough for me to put on some deodorant.

While I scramble to do that, I observe her and Mom's interaction. Mom's being hospitable and kind as usual, yet Gila's shrinking back. She didn't seem so shy on the phone. I wonder what she's thinking...*I shouldn't do that*. Instead, I start to go over to them;

however, when I get to my bedroom door, I realize I'm nervous. I don't usually talk to girls.

"Neon, your friend from school is here!" Mom calls. Her voice is deep and resonant. It sort of compels me forward. I meet Gila on the stairwell. Mom had sent her up and gone back to cooking.

She grins at me. "Wassup, bro?"

Wassup bro? "Absolutely nothing." I jerk my head towards my room and lead the way. "What about you?"

"I was at practice."

"Are you a cheerleader?" She's small and perky, so I give it a guess.

"Yeah. It's lame. We have a short week, so we have to practice this weekend too."

"I'd say it sounds fun..." I let her into my room. "...but it doesn't." She has a bunch of stuff with her. Materials for the project. "Just set those down on the desk. And you can sit—"

She plops down at the desk. Her weirdly gigantic braid dangles well past the seat of the chair.

"Anywhere."

I have her run the details by me, making no attempt to hide how lost I was. Strangely, she's really patient. I thought smart, preppy kids didn't like working with lazies like me. We have to make a model of and write a paper on some organic compound.

Light conversation helps the time go by. My recent foray into "street art" enters the mix along with my skateboarding, her cheerleading, birthdays, and other stuff. I have a stereo system in here, so I let her play music off her phone. There's a lot of stuff in a foreign language. She skips those.

"I don't see you at school a lot," she tells me.

"Probably because I'm never there. Ahaha."

She doesn't laugh with me. "Must be a Gemini thing," she mumbles disapprovingly.

Hours pass and we're making good headway. She's gluing foam balls to sticks, and I'm lying on my bed looking for sources on my laptop. She must be more comfortable once we've talked a while. After looking over her shoulder at the door, she says, "Your mom is nice. She's a little pushy, but nice."

"That's the way she is. I hope she didn't bug you or anything."

"Well...There was something. It kind of threw me off."

"I guess she is a little strange. She eats her pizza crust-first."

"No, it's not that. I don't think she likes me."

"Oh? Why do you say that?"

"It's like she was being fake nice to me. Artificial, y'know?"
I glance at her. "Maybe I smell bad."

Without meaning to, I pause the music.

"Did I say something?" She asks.

"No. My bad." The music resumes. We work a little more and wrap up for the day. When her ride comes, she leaves me to ponder. No one's ever called my mom fake before. Not the crusty street kids, not Aunt Blythe, or anyone. She's always real with people.

I saw her in the hall before my first class on Monday and was reminded of it. Fake, huh? Why did she think that? Rather than ask her about it, I'll get the answer directly. I don't know what class she has, so I go to mine and scan the building for her. I find her across the campus in her own class playing with her braid and chatting with some other girl. I'm about to delve into her mind before she freezes and looks around the room as though she knows I'm there, or at least that *something* is there.

"What's wrong?" Her friend asks.

This surprises Gila, like she forgot she was having a conversation. "Nothing. I thought I heard something." Now, I'm super curious. Who is Gila really?

Inside, her mind is incredibly alien, but human, nonetheless.

She's worried about the presence she felt. It's closer now than before. She isn't aware that it's me. In fact, she wonders if it's a ghost. She asks Who are you? This question doesn't come directly from her brain. It originates from some other place.

How can you tell I'm here?

It's just something I can do. I can feel you there.

Really? That explains it. What does that 'feel' like?

It varies depending on the individual. You feel very dull and gray, like you're a bit removed from this world. She pauses. You're also very familiar.

I've been made! *Uh...look, a train!* I mentally shout.

A train? She's imagining a train all of a sudden. *Why?*

By the time she asks, both my consciousness and the train have made our strategic exit. I'm back in my classroom and there's a worksheet in front of me that wasn't there before. Wow. She can do...whatever it is she does, and I'm psychic. It should at the very least give us something to discuss.

It doesn't though. In chemistry, she tells me she'll handle the rest of the project herself, and I can go home. I disregard it as an opportunity to fool around after school. Later, I try and call her and ask if she finished our assignment without any trouble. She doesn't answer. Instead she messages me.

It reads, "I can't talk. But I'm done with everything." It's punctuated with a smile emoji.

Gradually, I try more and more to get her attention. It's not even romantic. She was refreshing to be with somehow, but right when I felt it, it started slipping away. Soon, she only turns away when she sees me. Maybe she doesn't like me.

Loneliness starts to creep up on me. I blink and it's no longer cold and leaves cover the trees once again. My birthday is in a couple of weeks and I'm honestly too bored to care. I do have friends at school, I could maybe do something with them for once.

Not that it matters anyway. Blythe probably wouldn't let me celebrate. I've been skipping more often and whenever she caught me, she was more upset. At least until I calmed her down. Eventually, she didn't react anymore. Though she couldn't hide her disdain for me completely.

Imagine if she knew the company I've recently been keeping when I wasn't at home. To be honest, she could probably smell it on me. The reason it's been lonely is because I haven't seen Travis or Duke in a while. So to kill time and fill the gap, I found some dudes around the skate park. They're shady and I don't enjoy their company, but I can smoke for free with them.

The school week just ended, and I awake Saturday morning to an empty house. Craving activity, I go out looking for something to do. After a train, I end up in the city where Travis's apartment is. It wasn't intentional. Probably out of habit. I was just wandering and found myself here. Maybe I'll run into him. I saw or heard less and less of him and Duke as the season waned. Then not at all. Whatever our issue was, it came to a head when we were last together.

I was with them after a bad morning. The first warm morning all year. I woke up angry and stayed that way all day. We were loitering in front of a corner store shooting dice. I'd had a string of bad rolls and the latest wasn't any better. That's when Duke made one too many bad jokes.

He accentuated my misfortune with something stupid like, "Dang, Neon. Looks like there's some trouble in paradise." He sounded so proud of his garbage pun, too.

"Oh my God, will you shut up! That doesn't even make sense, you moron."

Travis stirred. "Chill out, it's just a joke." He told me. I got mad and told Duke to shut up all the time. I still don't understand why I had to "chill out" then.

I grimaced at him. "You chill out. Tell me what to do again."

He wasn't one to back down from a dare. "Chill out, you speed bump. 'Fore I take your phone and put it on a high shelf."

That did it. I shoved him in the shoulder. Not that it meant much to him; he hardly even moved. Meanwhile, his push back knocked me to the pavement. I didn't want to be outdone, so from where I was, I closed my eyes and threw him a few feet backward. He landed on his side.

I casually advanced on him with my hands resting on my head to assert dominance and held him in place as he tried to stand. I could feel him struggling against me. In the end, it wasn't a fair fight. He realized this and surrendered.

"Let me go," he said. I obliged and offered a hand to him. He swatted it away and got up himself. "Duke. I'm going. Come on"

I didn't mean to make him that mad. "Hey, you don't have to leave."

"Shut up." He spat at me. Duke, who'd been uncharacteristically uninvolved during our tussle, brushed past me and started away with Travis.

"Stop." I demanded. And they did. "What's wrong with you guys? It isn't that serious."

They mulled it over. It wasn't that bad, was it? They can't even remember what they were mad about. The more they tried to recall it, the less they could recall. Like a dream.

We hung out the rest of the day as though nothing happened. Apparently, they remembered after that because I haven't seen them

since. If I did, I would reassure them that nothing is wrong, and that they're overreacting.

I'm being silly. If Travis wanted to see me, he'd do it like he always did. There's nothing for me here. Thankfully, the block is a little busy this morning with people going to work and such. I'm able to hail a cab going by and go to the market square. I don't feel like skating or anything, but I figure buying things could entertain me.

During the ride I scan for a good place to start. The driver is about to turn a corner when I spot the front of a pet store. Out of the blue, I want a dog. I pay the driver to wait for me and hop out.

Hours later, I'm sitting in a park sharing a gaze with an astute puppy. The guy in the store called him a "Eurasier." I was told their store specialized in breeding dogs, so I took his word for it. I'm not old enough to buy a dog by myself, though curiously, they didn't sell a dog to me. They sold one to a six-and-a-half-foot airplane pilot wanting to surprise his daughter. The dog is adorable—I wouldn't let anyone hear me call him that—and the idea of having him excites me. Inspired by the way he's sitting on the ground next to me, I decided to name him Sphynx. Your name is Sphynx, I tell him. Dogs don't speak, not with words, but with an impulse to which I'm met with a primal form of acknowledgment. It's weird.

He periodically wants to bark at or jump on people who walk by, but I urge him not to. He's really rowdy if I let him loose, which reminds me of Blythe. As mad as she is at me, there's no way she's letting me keep this thing. I shake my head. It would be fine. I have to keep him; he already has a name.

I spend the rest of the day playing with him. I don't want to go home and deal with Aunt Blythe. Once it gets dark, I'm too tired to care anymore. I get on another train heading back. Sphynx sits in my lap on the way. Luckily, no one bothers me that he's out in the open. It's nice to hold this small, warm, pulsating creature against me.

Aunt Blythe must be in the kitchen cooking because I smell food when I fling open the door. I have to do it hands free because I'm burdened with my skateboard, a dog in a container, and all of its

related dog things. I never get the chance to choose whether I want to sneak him in or rip the bandage off now because Sphynx yips, loudly announcing his arrival.

"What in the name of..." I hear from deep within the house followed by oncoming footsteps. Blythe peeks from behind a corner brandishing a spatula out in front her for potential danger. "What that?"

I sigh. "A dog."

She reveals herself fully. "Who's dog? Cause I know it ain't yours."

"He is mine. I bought him." I carry all the stuff I'm holding to the sitting room and plop it on a table. Except Sphynx. I set him on the ground and let him out. "His name is Sphynx."

"Since when do they let kids buy animals? H-How much did that cost?"

"Does it matter? He's here now."

"Neon, you can't have a dog. You can't even go to school. How are you gonna magically produce the responsibility to take care of that?"

"The difference is that I actually want to take care of him. Come on. He's handsome."

"He could be a movie star. You aren't keeping him."

"Yes I am," I demand.

Blythe relents for a second and then shakes her head. "I'm not doing this again."

"Doing what again?"

"You *know* what." As she's going to say something else, Blythe looks down and shrieks. "My ring!" She hustles behind me toward the coffee table.

"Your ring?" I look in time to see Sphynx swallowing Blythe's old ring. If I knew that was a hazard, I'd have kept hold of him. "Why isn't it on your finger?"

Blythe has her hands on her head in a panic. "I took it off while I was in here earlier so I could make food." She briefly glances at me and her face brightens. "What are you waiting for? Get it out of him!"

I hadn't thought of that. "C'mere, Sphynx," I command, and he hops into my arms. I close my eyes and telepathically search deep in his body. I can kind of feel the ring squeezing through into his stomach. "Aha!" I try to pull it backward and am immediately resisted by his esophagus. Sphynx starts making a weird heaving sound. It might hurt, so I stop.

Blythe is hysterical; repeatedly telling me to get it out. "That was my mother's ring, Neon," she cries. It's only stressing me out.

There is another way. If I can't pull the ring out by itself, I can make him puke it up. I upset the fluid in his stomach. The acid roils and churns against its fleshy prison walls and out it comes. All over the floor. The ring splashes into the vomit.

Blythe swipes it and is relieved. She considers the puke on the floor before putting her hand over her eyes. "I can't. I'm tired. We can talk about this in the morning."

"There's nothing to talk about."

She throws her head back and then gives me a defeated stare. "Oh my God, Neon...don't. Please."

Too late. "Go to bed, Auntie. Having a dog is a great idea."

"You're right, babe. I wasn't thinking it through." With that, she shuffles off to bed.

In the morning while I'm in the kitchen pouring cereal, I notice the voicemail light on the old landline is blinking. I press a button to play them. The first one is nonsense, which I skip.

The next is Aunt Blythe...

"Neon. It's really hard to say this but I can't look after you anymore. I don't know how much more I can take mentally. I'm constantly watching you do things that I know neither me nor your parents would approve of yet am unable to do anything about it. The smoking, the skipping, the insults...I'm losing my mind.

Even when I'm not around you it's like I'm witnessing things that don't actually happen. I swear I even saw my..." Her words get caught. After she clears her throat she continues. "I need therapy, so I'm tagging in your cousin Chris. You always got along with him, right? I'm sorry I couldn't tell you this directly. I didn't want you doing whatever it is you do to stop me. And I really didn't want to face the rejection if you didn't try. Chris should be there in a couple of weeks. Before your birthday. For now, don't kill that dog. I love—

Dumbfounded, I turn off the message and rush to her room. Her bags are gone along with her clothes. She can't have left. There's no way. I was just talking to her.

I call her back, but she doesn't answer. I try again. And again. And again. Nothing. Aren't adults supposed to put up with kids' non-sense? What would Dad think? She just abandoned me? Then had the nerve to say, "I love you." I think she did anyway.

What now? I'm kind of hurt that she left. If I knew, I could have convinced her it was fine. I spend the rest of the day desperately trying to call her and give up when I catch myself calling my mom. There's nothing to do. She's gone for now, surprising that it is. This must have been weighing on her for a while.

The next day, I debate whether to go to school. If I skip again, I'll just prove Blythe's point. Not to mention it's almost the end of the school year and the exams are coming. I have to go. I get dressed and am almost out the door before I hear a yip.

Uh-oh. I can't leave him alone. But it didn't sit right with me to stay home. How much do puppies need to eat a day? According to the internet, it's three. If I pour three bowls I could potentially

make him only eat them at specific intervals. Or if I do one big bowl, he'll eat what he needs when he needs it. I prefer the latter idea.

What about when it goes through him? "Here, Sphynx!" I call. He comes running. Once I fill his bowl of food, I kneel and place a hand on his head, trying my best to influence him when to eat. He seems to get it.

I sit and rub his head for a bit. "Oh Sphynx, why did you go for her ring?" I ask him. He stares back at me vapidly. There's a sliding door in the kitchen leading out into the garden. It's walled off, but that's good. There's also no grass for him to dig underneath. Unfortunately, that meant he could only go in the plants or on the cobblestone. That's all right. I crack the door wide enough for him to go through. Then I do the same thing to him I did with the food, except with the door and the pooping.

Satisfied with the bandage solution, I commute to school beneath an overcast sky. Nothing notable happens all day until I get to chemistry. While we're reading chapters in the textbook, I notice the teacher's actually making the answer key to the test on his computer.

"Well, isn't that convenient?" I say to myself before hopping on the opportunity to see what he's seeing.

The first thing that jumps out at me is that the test isn't multiple choice, drastically reducing the difficulty for me if I don't cheat. The next thing is that the questions and their answers are arbitrary, not necessarily the main idea stuff one would expect. They could be on the smallest of random details. If I did study, I would need to pour over every little thing. I couldn't have been luckier. Anything I missed he has to "double-check" to make sure he typed correctly. All the while, I'm copying it down.

When class is over, Gila is in front of me in the hallway. Before I can stop myself, I call her. "Hey."

She turns. "Oh...hi?"

"How have you been?"

"Peachy."

"Same," I lie. "Are you ready for your exams?"

"For the most part. You?"

"Nope. But I have the answer key for chemistry. He was making it when we were in class." I show it to her in my notebook.

"How'd you..." She trails off. She must already have a clue.

"It was easy. Hey, if you're not against cheating we can ace this thing together. Let's go over them together." I wave the notebook at her.

"I have to go to class."

"Later. After school."

"I have practice."

I swallow. This is so pathetic. She's drawing me in. Even when I've been angry at her all this time.

A second goes by as she looks me up and down. Something in her expression changes before she responds. "I could use a break. I'll be by after I'm done today." She goes to class.

It's bittersweet. On one hand I'm happy to be with her. On the other, she could have just asked for the notebook. Now she's spending time with me because I wouldn't let her tell me no. It was just one project. Why do I want her company?

School lets out and I leave the building wondering how to blow the hour and a half I have until Gila is finished. I could go home and wait. Or I could go get high. The second choice is much less boring.

In the usual spot, somewhat underneath a highway, I see the

usual loiterers: A tatted up gentleman in a wifebeater named Will, a dropout named Rod—I think it was short for something—and a burly, light skinned fellow with eyebrow slits and height to spare named Kenzo. I came upon such fascinating company after I helped them get their basketball from stuck on a rim on the nearby court. After that, I ended up smoking with them.

None of them were very interesting. I usually poked fun at them by cracking jokes at their expense and seeing if any of them would catch on. Will was usually savvy. Thankfully, Rod wasn't because he was always deathly serious. And violent.

Kenzo nudges Will as he spots me approaching. "What's up?" he calls.

I shrug, "I'm bored for now." When I get closer, they all dap me off. Kenzo is overly rough with his. "What are we doing today, friends? Discussing the city's shifting political climate?"

Rod scoffs.

Will chuckles and throws a glance at Kenzo. "No. Just chilling."

"Mind rolling one? I don't have a lot of time." I motion with my hands what I mean.

Rod scoffs again.

Will's attention is diverted behind me. "Waiting on him." He points. Turning around I see none other than Bryce for the first time in months.

"You guys know each other? Small world."

"Nigga, small what?"

"He's my cousin." Kenzo pipes up.

"Mmm." I hold out my hand to Bryce. "I know we didn't end on the best of terms the last time we saw each other."

He takes it and does whatever weird ritual he does. "It's cool man."

It doesn't look cool. Not on his face. Always having to show people what they need to see or tell them what they need to hear gets tiresome. And then they won't even do the same when I have something I need to hear. "Out with it," I snap, and he can no longer resist the truth.

"I don't like you, freak." I hear the shock behind me as they all stir. The atmosphere turns stale.

This gives me pause, but I'm not surprised. Everyone, including Bryce, quickly forgets he said that, but I look on him a little more apprehensively.

"I don't see you around here that often." Kenzo says.

Bryce answers for me. "I told you, he lives out in the country. On some money shit."

Kenzo nods with approval and moves to the park table a few feet away with Will. Bryce follows with his bag. There Kenzo ground up the plant and rolled it up. The first time, I was nervous about them doing this out in the open. That was before I realized the cops around here would probably sit and smoke with you.

After a few rounds, they haven't passed it to me once. They're definitely making a point of some kind. I've kept quiet about it until now.

"Yo." I make a "gimme" gesture.

Rod has the blunt. "Oh. You want..." He goes to pass it to me but pulls it away when I reach for it. "I hate freeloaders. And I didn't see you put up anything for this." He drags the "s" out into a hiss.

"I have money if you want me to pitch in."

"Pitch in," he mocks. "We been known you had money." He wastefully tosses the blunt. And stands. "Run them pockets. Capital One." Will and Kenzo are on either side of him saying nothing. I didn't

see Bryce leave, but he's gone. I guess this was planned.

I can't say I'm surprised. I stand up as well. "No."

"You should change your mind." He says lifting his shirt above his waste. The gleam of something metal shines in my eye. I slowly start to back away, but Kenzo gets in the way. His midsection fills my view as he closes in.

Running isn't an option. This is hard to do, so I can only do it on one person at a time. I can't really focus well on who I target; there's a crowd and I don't know the person's specific mental geometry. I want to aim it at Rod since he's the one with the Ruger, but disappointment hits me as Will falls to the ground unconscious. Rod is shaken.

Quickly I throw him a few meters away to create distance and incapacitate him. Next is Kenzo, who's shocked at what's happening, but comes to his senses. He's entirely too close. I want to look him in the eye, but his chest is blocking most of the view. Whatever his next move is he can't make it. I'm locking him in place. Concern starts to overtake his imposing demeanor as he becomes aware of this.

He stumbles backward when I release him. He's very confused. Unfortunately, I underestimate how quickly he can recover. Before I can retaliate, he raps me on the forehead and sends me to the ground. "What was that?" He growls at me.

I caress the skin where he hit me. "What? You mean this?" I hoist him into the air, and he scrambles his feet to find footing that's far gone from him. The road isn't too overloaded with traffic where the cars can't go fast, nor is it too empty that the cars are too far in between. Perfect. Getting to my feet, I hover Kenzo over the street when there's not enough time for the next car coming to stop.

Kenzo shouts in fear and squeezes his eyes shut. At the last second, I yank him to the sidewalk. Right as I do, I'm tackled and brought to the ground again by Rod. He pulls his fist back to punch me, but freezes. Then a scream erupts from his mouth. He feels agonizing

pain in his left forearm. I broke it. Tucking it against himself, he scrambles backward. He can't think rationally. He can't think of anything but the pain.

In actuality, his arm is unharmed. Suggesting to him that it wasn't would scare him off of me and stop any further advances. Will is unconscious and since Kenzo was already long gone, that means I'm the victor. Everything turned out alright. I deescalated it. It's fine. But I do feel a dull pain in my side as I'm going home. I press the spot with my fingers. Nothing is wrong with it. I didn't even get hit there.

On the train back home, I get a message from Gila telling me she's through with practice. We arrive at my place at the same time. I wave to whoever is in the driver seat of the car and I kick up my board to rush in and check on Sphynx.

He comes running when I open the door. The food bowl is empty, and the garden is smelly. He behaved well.

Gila enters the kitchen and gasps. "You have a dog?" She outstretches her arms to Sphynx. He doesn't react. She nevertheless maintains her position. There seems to be some unspoken communication going on between them. He finally jumps into her arms.

It took me hours at the park the other day to get him to come to me. And I was using telepathy to speed up the process. "How did you do that?"

She rocks him against her body. "I resonated with him. What's his name?"

"Sphynx."

"Okay. Get down, Sphynx." He immediately hops to the floor. Whenever I've told him what to do, he hasn't listened unless I forced him. I'm a little jealous.

"So, you want to study for chemistry now?" I ask her.

"Oh! I forgot. Yes."

We work in the living room on the couch. Gila makes note cards and we quiz ourselves. Our banter is more animated than last time and I catch myself laughing more than usual. The pain in my side hasn't subsided. Actually, is it getting worse? Speaking is getting harder like I'm too weak to spare the air. The next bout of laughter sets the room spinning.

"Neon, are you okay?" I hear Gila ask. She sounds like she's underwater. The last thing I hear is her subdued scream as my head falls forward onto the couch cushion. And the last thing I see is a quickly growing red blotch on the upholstery.

Light shines brightly through the window. All is quiet as I take in my surroundings. All besides a periodic beep. I'm in a hospital room. I move my arm—there's a drip attached to it.

There are wires coming off of me as well. They're connected to a heart monitor... A nurse was here to enlighten me on a few things. She left soon after.

Footsteps approach and in comes a doctor and a police officer. "Good morning, you freak of nature," the doctor says.

"Um. Good morning." I reply. "Why exactly am I here again? Or, where am I in the first place?"

"Sunset General. And did the nurse not tell you? You got shot! You've been zonked for like a day."

The nurse did say that. I just needed to hear it again. "When?"

The officer speaks up. "That's what we're trying to figure out." He takes a seat beside the bed. "This has got to be the weirdest case I've dealt with. Check it out. So we get a call that there's been a gunshot. This person didn't see. Only heard. We sort of triangulate the spot where the gun was fired—detective stuff, you wouldn't get it—and find blood on the ground. But only little drips. People around say they only saw a street fight, with some druggie nonsense sprinkled in about guys floating and stuff.

I'm starting to think we're at the wrong place and the gun was

fired somewhere else when you come in. There's a call in another precinct about you. I find out you meet the description of one the guys at the scene and you have a gunshot wound. Unless your friend isn't letting on everything she knows, you got shot before you got home. Now, I can call this case shut when you tell me how you got thirty miles away after taking a bullet without bleeding out and who you were fighting with."

"I didn't get shot though. I got into a fight, but I was fine after."

"Um. Okay. D-Did you get shot after that or..."

"I never got shot! Wouldn't I be in pain?"

The doctor chimes in. "That's morphine. You definitely got shot. You think we just opened a hole in you and stitched it up for fun?"

I groan. How? I was fine. I remember up until I got home. No one would shoot me there. Index cards appear in my head. I was studying for my test with Gila. Then nothing. Before that, I spanked Kenzo, Rod, and Will. Rod had a gun. But he never used it. I got out unscathed. I was fine. Wasn't I?

"I fought with someone named Rod and two others." After giving the officer a description, he's off. I can't answer his other question because I don't recall being shot. He'd be back later for more questions. When he's gone, fatigue sets in. It's as if I only regained consciousness to see what was going on.

My dreams are filled with scenarios of Aunt Blythe, Travis, and Duke. They hate me in every one of them. I can't imagine why. There's a lot of yelling and cursing, but no one ever seems to want a resolution like I do. It feels unfair. Sphynx appears next. He doesn't react when I say anything to him.

Then comes Gila. She's in an indistinct location focused on a...gray blob thing. She calls it a husk. It's gross to her, and it makes her not want to be near it. But it's withering away, and she wants to help it as well.

"Why is your mom fake?" She asks it.

"Because that's my resolution," it answers. In dreams, I occasionally fill the shoes of people or things other than me but end up being me one way or another. In this case, I could be either Gila or the husk. Or an invisible third party. "They died here. My parents." The husk explains.

Gila nods. "You won't meet the same fate."

Suddenly I'm back in the hospital room. No. This one is different. It's dark outside and I'm no longer on a drip or a heart monitor. I don't remember moving. A nurse says I've been in and out of consciousness all day. When I ask him why I'm so tired, he tells me it's probably stress and that I can go once Aunt Blythe gets here. That's tomorrow.

I turn over in the bed towards the window. The door opens and closes, which must be the nurse leaving. Then I hear footsteps and sit up. There's a person—a small woman. A visitor? She seems indistinguishable, but I concentrate on her and the features come into focus.

"Mom?" It's her. Before my very eyes. I don't feel like I'm dreaming, but I must be. I'm not projecting her there either. Not deliberately. "How are you here?"

To my right, someone speaks. "I thought it would be good for you to see her. For closure." It's Gila.

"Is this some kind of illusion? Did you know she's dead? You've met her."

"You told me. And suddenly it all made sense"

I still can't believe what I'm seeing. That is, until Mom clasps my cheeks with her hands. She isn't solid, but not completely intangible either. She feels warm. Like a fire. This was exactly what it used to feel like. And when I examine her face, I'm certain it's not a dream because no mental image I've made of her could ever capture her with this level of accuracy. Hot tears well in my eyes. I'm ashamed I ever even tried.

"Can you leave us alone?" I ask Gila.

"No. I'm her medium. She's here through me and she'll speak through me."

"Is she saying anything?"

"She's been screaming at me to tell you she and Dad love you." Dad. Where is he?

"I love you too!" I scream back. She jumps. What else should I tell her? I don't know.

"She's asking what's wrong."

I smirk. She always used to listen to my problems when I was younger. In fact, her and dad would make me tell them. "I don't know what to do. I thought I could use whatever this is that I can use, and fix things, and it would be fine. But nothing is fine. Auntie Blythe isn't fine. I'm not fine." Mom leans on the bed and embraces me.

"She says it *will* be okay. You'll find other ways to fix things."

"Thanks for believing in me."

"Neon, as touching as this is, I can't keep this connection up for long." Gila says. "I have to break it soon."

"Wait! Not yet." My heart races. "Is she saying anything now?"

"She is."

"What?"

"She said to go to school."

She's starting to feel less substantial. I hug her fiery mass tighter and utter one last "I love you" before she dissipates entirely, and I'm left alone with tears streaking my face. I used to think saying I love you was corny. But it's different when you can't say it anymore.

Gila wipes at her eyes. "She said 'I love you too.'" I grab her and pull her into an embrace as well.

"Thank you. Even if I didn't need that, thank you." She feels just like my mother did. I hold her at arm's length. "You aren't really here?"

She sniffs. "It's after visiting hours."

"How did you do this?"

"I went to their resting spot and asked nicely." She's being facetious, but she assures me it's true.

I think about what Mom said. That I'd find other ways to fix things. Could I really? I wipe my eyes too. "Months ago, you told me I was dull and gray."

"When you tried to invade my mind. Yes."

"How am I now?"

Gila squints at me. "I'm starting to see some color in there."