

One Last Chance
By Luke Williamson, 9th Grade
Second Place, Spring 2023

There is a street with no particular name. It is desolate. No shoppers line the sidewalks. No wanderers fill the concrete. It is short, and dead-ended, so doesn't get much traffic. There are a few shops and an outdated car sales billboard, but not much else.

That street has a building. The building is the tallest on the empty street, at eight stories high. The gray scale concrete of the walls echoes with a chilling, piercing, suffocating silence. It is almost completely devoid of life, just as the street. Almost.

At the foot of a stairwell within this building there is a man. He is haggard looking, with glazed blue eyes, matted black hair, and gaunt yellow skin. To call him something of a wreck would be an understatement. The man begins his mortal, dire climb.

Starting his journey, the tears and memories mingle into a sensory whirlpool, forcing Michael Stone Jr. to recall his life before.

As a young boy, he stands at the blackboard. With the joy of discovery yet to be stolen from him, he writes nineteen plus seventeen equals twenty-six. In response, his classmates howl with laughter, driving a growing embarrassment. Michael grows red, choking back tears, and returns to his seat.

More recently, a grown Michael hangs his head. He walks out of an office that is no longer his, taking his possessions and sweeping the last memory of him from the workplace. This draws chuckling and pointing from his coworkers, reddening his face as before.

Crying is supposed to be good for you, but it is no help to Michael now, for he has reached the third floor. At this point he's hit with another memory, this one buried deeper than the last.

The stage for this trauma is in front of a locker. The players are Michael Stone Jr. and Julia Bail. It is a tragedy. Julia Bail is a beautiful girl, and she is the one who Michael wished to ask to the prom. Unfortunately, our protagonist hadn't found the courage up until this point.

The hapless lead managed to stutter out an invitation finally.

"Is this a joke?" was the reply he received.

Julia went on to explain to Michael how he was neither strong enough nor good looking enough to be with her. This would mark the end of any confessions in Michael's life... for now.

By the fifth floor, the man's knees are growing weak. Movement seems to require a strength foreign to him. Proper footing is becoming sly and elusive for the burdened man.

At this moment, when his legs are weak, he remembers his childhood home. It is a comforting place, a yellow house guarded by neatly trimmed hedges and a sturdy oak tree. It is the kind of country home many people dream about. It only lacks one key feature. A mother.

Her life was traded for his at birth, an exchange. He would know her solely from photographs. He dreamt he knew her. He dreamt she played with him during the day and sang to him at night. He dreamt she cooked a wonderful dinner and kissed him to sleep and held him tight.

It was all a lie. She was an illusory mother, a whisper of happiness that Michael could never quite make out.

As he crossed the threshold of the sixth floor, Michael Stone Jr. remembered one thing from that old house. Michael Stone Sr.

His old man's usual posture, a bottle in one hand, the other poised to strike. The hand came onto the young boy's face again, and again, and again.

"You like that boy?" Mike Sr. roared. "Think that's funny?"

Michael Jr. just whimpered and shook his head vigorously, submissive to self-preservation. What could he do? Nothing. Nothing at all. That is the answer.

Michael Stone Jr. staggered onto the roof of the building, recalling the most important episodes.

He first recalls a woman. She had midnight black hair with eyes of silken green. Alison. His bride. The love of his life. The light in his darkness. His fountain of youth. She was witty and caring, full of life and passion. He supposed all of this didn't matter in the end.

Michael Jr. could still hear the fire crackling and smell the smoke rising. The smoke hid the body of Allison Stone, the one he loved. A trucker was fired, and the husband was compensated, but it changed nothing. It mattered marginally.

The unwed man still heard echoes of her voice. He muffled them, ignoring his conscience as it screamed for air amid the flood of alcohol. The bottle made the problems vanish. His job. His kid. His life. All pushed back.

His kid. His kid! He would miss Jimmy. A caring head on three-year-old shoulders. Adventurous, curious, loving, he was constant reminder of the woman he had lost.

One night, drowned in whiskey, Michael heard a "mommy." It was a word he wouldn't take and couldn't bear. He recoiled his fist, recalling old family methods.

He had stopped. He couldn't hit his son. All he could do was sob and hold him close.

That night, Michael came to a realization. There was only one way to break the cycle and spare his son from his own life. The kid would be okay. He had Allison's mom to take care of him.

And so here we are. The tortured man has reached the threshold, the precipice. There is no turning back should he take the step. He could still turn back, and spare himself from the cold

asphalt below, but it would cost his son dearly. And so, for this man there is truly only one option. He must spare his son.

At 7:36 A.M. on September 28th, 2023, Michael Bartholomew Stone Jr. threw himself off of a building with the intention to take his own life.

The man has done this for a son he will never see grow up, which gives him regret. There will be no driving lessons, no hugs at graduation, no marriage advice, nothing. Nothing is left for this man, and nothing will be left of this man.

So he lifts up his request. If it falls upon ears, he hopes that they are not deaf ones. *Please take care of my son. Watch over him. Let him grow strong. Let him love, and not lose. Let him live a life of joy and peace.*

He says his thank you and closes his eyes, as the concrete is ever nearing. His moment in time is ending. Before the darkness, Michael Stone Jr. notes a car sale billboard. The sale ended years ago, and the billboard is useless.

And so the last thing Michaels sees before he dies are three words, thirteen letters printed in a bold red. ONE LAST CHANCE.

“Dr. Murray, he’s awake.”

Philip Murray looks up from his cluttered clipboard at the unexpected words from his head nurse.

“By he, do you mean...”

The nurse simply nods her head, striding quickly towards the aforementioned patient’s room. Phil Murray follows, hitting a brisk jog for the first time in twenty years.

The pair reach the room at the same time, greeted by the sight of Michael Stone Jr. with his eyes slightly open, his lips moving nearly silently. Dr. Murray leans in, not knowing what the

almost imperceptible whisper may hold. His old ears can just barely make out a single word, repeated in constant loop.

“Jimmy.”

The doctor begins barking orders at his nurse.

“His file, Ms. Andrews. Check all of his readings. All of them!”

Flipping rapidly through his patient’s information, Murray finally finds the word he was searching for.

“Jimmy. That’s your boy, isn’t it?”

By this time, the doorway is crowded by a few curious medical staff. Phil Murray swivels around to them.

“Call all known relations! Get his son on the line!”

Turning back towards the awoken patient, he lowers his tone.

“Is there anything you recall from your fall? What do you last remember?”

The words in Michael Stone Jr.’s voice are even softer now, as he lifts himself, sitting up slightly. The doctor reciprocates, placing his ear nearly touching his patient’s lips. His hearing isn’t what it once was, but he strains himself, tuning out all other noise and focusing on Michael Stone’s words, his second speech after being born again. Finally, after what seems like eons, Phil Murray hears three words in a low tone.

“One last chance.”