

## Honorable Mention, Prose, Grades 10-12, Jonathan Cohen

### The Warning

A week before it happened, I saw them come through town. On a slow evening, I was hustling like I always do. Not many people were out and about then. I guess that's why they chose that time to come out and plan. I played my saxophone elegantly to the small crowd around me, but as I peered above the heads of my little group, I saw them. They wore long spotless beige coats and thick velvet leather gloves. They talked to each other, and while I was across the street, I could tell they were whispering. They'd put their hands over their mouths, leaning close to one another's ears. They were pointing at specific buildings as if they were trying to choose one. They kept strolling and eventually left my frame of view. I assume my music sounded a bit off for the rest of that night.

On my way out of town that night I stopped by the police station. They gave me weird looks in there, I guess someone like me had never just walked in like that. I asked if I could report some suspicious activity. Silence. Utter silence, until one cop laughed and told me to leave before I get myself in trouble.

I continued on home away from the town and out into the countryside. It's a walk I take every day back and forth from my house and town square. By the time I get home, I only have the energy to put my raggedy coat on a rack, put my earnings from the day into a box, and collapse onto my cot.

The next few days I lost some patrons through my anxiety. Sometimes someone would come up to put coins in my hat, and there wouldn't be many others around. When that was the case, I would stop playing, and ask what they thought about the beige men. If they had seen them, if they knew what they were up to. Usually, they would just turn away with a sour look on their face, change still in hand.

A week after I first spotted them, I walked from my house to see a horrific sight. I approached a little town set ablaze, all the buildings burning to the ground. But the streets in between looked untouched, so I continued forward. I walked down main street with a fiery hellscape roaring on both sides. I seemed to be the only one there. There weren't any firetrucks, no one just off to the side watching. There was not a single trace of anyone ever being there. It was just me, my saxophone, and the fire. I didn't really know what to do, so I just did what I always did. I walked down to my usual corner, put down my hat, and played. The fire behind me crackled, but the sounds of my saxophone overpowered it tenfold. Eventually, a group of people came by. It was them, the beige men. They had huge unrelenting smiles, gawking at their surroundings until one of them spotted me. He came over and listened. Wary of why he was there, I ended up playing the most soulful music to ever come out of my lungs and through that reed. After a minute or so, the man kneeled down and put a wad of bills into my hat. He stood back up, gave me a wink, and returned to his friends, walking down the road of flames.