

December 2019

## Red and Blue

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### Recommended Citation

Gladden, Cia N. (2019) "Red and Blue," *I2*: Vol. 1: Iss. 3, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/i2/vol1/iss3/8>

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Damien realized with an iron pang of nauseating panic that the red-and-blue lights behind him were meant for *him*, and thick whorls of fear constricted around his lungs, pulling taut. A nervous laugh bubbled in his throat, but he gulped it down; he was Alice in Wonderland, growing and growing and growing until he was pinned at all sides, the sides of the car suffocating and unrelenting.

The sirens whipped into a wailing frenzy, a cacophony of screeching, and Damien's pulse smattered wetly in his head, faster and faster like a train with a broken brake—  
*What had he done?* He scoured his brain for an answer (a stop sign, a red light, a wrong turn?), but he found only unadulterated panic. His hands, slick with anticipation, tightened around the steering wheel, and suddenly he couldn't hear his audiobook anymore.

Fortunately, muscle memory took over, so he pulled over (hand over hand, right foot forward) with trembling, white-knuckled fingers. It took him three tries to set the car in park, for he was too busy clinging to his composure to focus on stopping the vehicle. In the back of his mind, a muffled voice told him to stay calm. *Be polite and respectful*, his mom would tell him. *Do whatever he tells you to do, because your most important priority is to get home safe, not to prove that you're right. You mess up, you get killed.*

*Killed.* Damien was sixteen years old, but according to the United States of America, he wasn't too young to die. He was just old enough, in fact, to be a threat.

As the police car behind him slowed to a halt, fear crawled down Damien's back like a million spiders scampering over his skin. He sunk into the bowels of his mind, hanging on by a black thread: *he could die tonight*. Damien knew, through soap operas and Clint Eastwood

movies, what death was. He'd been to one funeral when he was seven. But he'd never had Death tap on his shoulder and ask him, *are you ready to go gently into that good night?*

His brain was an elastic band, far past the yield point. He placed his hands in his lap. Then on the wheel. Then back on his lap. Which position was the least threatening? He tugged uncomfortably on his hoodie: his dark green one, with a Nike symbol splashed across the front—what was he thinking? Trayvon Martin was wearing a hoodie when he died.

A car door slammed behind him, and dread flooded his nervous system, sending his heart into a chattering frenzy. He was *terrified*. But terror meant unpredictability, and unpredictability meant the police would open fire. He wondered, briefly, how long it would take for him to die after they shot him. A couple seconds? A minute? Fifteen minutes?

His fingers were iron clamps around the steering wheel (*don't be a threat, you can't be a threat*), and his hands felt hot, like fire-ants were creeping up his wrists. Did he have enough time to text his mom and say goodbye?

He knew the police officer was getting closer, but he didn't know *how* close. He didn't dare turn around and make eye contact; eye contact meant aggression, and aggression meant he never got to see his family again. He pictured his little sister's face with her sweet little smile. Where would he be shot? In the back? In the chest? In the head? He'd taken anatomy, so he knew more than the average person about what would happen once those bullets went through him. The options were endless, and the anticipation was acid, burning holes in his throat—three sharp knocks on his window.

Fear was an understatement; as Damien rolled the window down, Damien drowned in his apprehension, his breathing caught in his throat. Barbed wire wound around his torso, cutting into his organs, and his skin screamed at the officer's presence.

The world halted around him, a clashing of sharpened voices; fear swelled inside like an insidious bubble as that feeling of overwhelming panic spiked. He couldn't breathe, as though the cold muzzle of the gun was already at his chest and the bullets had torn through his chest to leave him struggling for breath and bleeding on the damp concrete, and in this moment, he was Laquan McDonald, he was Michael Brown, he was Trayvon Martin, and still he couldn't *breathe—*

A viscous voice, muted through an electric fence of panic and frantic heartbeats and strangled breaths: *one, two, three, four, five... You'll be okay, kid, there's nothing to be afraid of, you'll be just fine...*

His senses returned to him slowly, paralysis giving way to reality: the ache between his shoulder blades, the tremor of his hands, the male voice beside him, and the panic under his skin. "That's it," said the policeman beside him, a smile inching into his voice, just as Damien took a shaky gulp of air. "You're doing great, just keep on breathing."

He could feel his hands on the steering wheel, and he pried them away, rubbing his throbbing fingers. The policeman was still talking to him, and after a while his voice didn't sound so dangerous. It sounded gentle, really, just like his dad's. It was low and rhythmic, the lowest notes of an organ, and the barbed wire wound around his chest loosened a little. Swallowing his panic was like trying to pull a tortoise out of its shell, but somehow he managed, choking down a night's worth of panic. "Sorry, sir," he croaked, his voice oddly hoarse. Talking

to the officer went against everything he'd ever been taught: police are dangerous, police are violent, police are only ever going to hurt you, police aren't trustworthy...

But this one... This one had his dad's dopey smile and had just helped him out of a panic attack. The world had just flipped over on its head, and Damien was reeling from the aftermath of it.

Still bending awkwardly to reach the window of his car, the policeman gave him a hopeful grin. "Of course, kid. There's nothing you can do when you get 'em. Just gotta sit there and ride it all the way through, you know?"

Damien shrugged sheepishly, making sure his hands were still harmlessly in his lap. His panic was still draining out of his chest, and his shoulders slumped forward with exhaustion. The policeman cleared his throat.

"Anyway, I just pulled you over to tell you your brake lights are out. You didn't do anything wrong." He gave him a thumbs-up. "Just can't go around without your brake lights." He rambled for a bit, telling a little anecdote about broken brake lights; Damien thought it was because he wanted to distract him, and honestly, that was fine by him. When he was done, he smiled again, and gave Damien a little pat on his shoulder.

"You okay to get home, kid?"

Damien nodded mutely. His hands were still clammy, sticky with sweat.

"Good." The policeman grinned. "You have a good night."

But before he left, Damien's big mouth got the best of him. "Wait—how did you know?"

He turned around. "What?"

"How did you know, about the..."

“Panic attacks?” He laughed a little, rubbing his bald head. “My daughter gets those sometimes... She’s fifteen. I used to *freak* every time it happened, but now I’m used to it. Usually the counting works for her, so...” He shrugged. “I recognized the signs, and I thought it’d work for you.”

“And you weren’t...” Damien’s voice caught on his disbelief. “You weren’t scared of me?”

The bald policeman only shrugged, granting him an odd look. “You were listening to the third *Harry Potter* book on tape, kid. It’d be hard for me to be scared of you.”

And with that, he walked back to his car as Damien sat in utter silence. Well, *almost* utter silence, with the *Prisoner of Azkaban* muttering quietly in the background. The police car pulled away from the curb and drove off, and Damien was left alone again. He shook his head in disbelief for at least the third time that night, and, after gathering his senses, shifted the car into drive. Instead of dreadful panic, something like exhausted relief eased into his chest. His sister was never going to believe this.