

Catherine Pop

Finalist

2019 CFUW Writing Contest

The Mountvale Cheer Squad

“The message was clear.”

Kara’s eyes bore into his skull, the neon lights washing over her, turning her hair into a glossy waterfall of blue. Her uniform is an eye-searing shade of red.

“And they’re not happy you’re ignoring it.”

Next to her, Tiffany S. slowly nods while snapping her gum, idly scrolling through her phone and leaning on Madelaine’s shoulder. She’s tapping through too quickly for Sam to read anything, but from experience he knows it’ll hurt his eyes to look at it for too long. This whole neighbourhood hurts to look at sometimes.

“Wait, what message? What are you talking about?” His hand tightens around his bag strap. The other two have joined Kara in staring him down, and there’s something unnerving about the way they’re looking at him with their cold, sparkly eyes. Like these cheerleaders know something that he doesn’t.

“Don’t play dumb, kid. The Home Owners Association made it clear that your lawn isn’t meeting the neighbourhood’s standards.”

Tiffany S. tosses her shiny, blonde ponytail over her shoulder, like this is the most obvious thing in the world, and he’s an idiot for not understanding. Which, whatever. It’s not his fault he’s now the only new kid in town for years. How is he supposed to know all their inane rules off the bat?

“That’s the message you’re talking about? I don’t get it, what’s the big deal? Our lawn is a little bit long, big whoop. It’s getting late, I have to go home.” He takes a step forward.

They move with him. They’re still staring, and he’s starting to get antsy. Usually he waits as long as he can to get home, spending hours in the dingy diner behind him, but something about the senior girls of the Mountvale Cheer Squad is a thousand times more intimidating than his father could ever be.

“Look, I don’t get why you’re coming to me for this. It’s out of my control. If the HOA cares that much, they’ll have to talk to my dad.” He tries his hardest not to flinch when he thinks of his dad’s inevitable reaction to the HOA hitting him up about the lawn.

“Oh honey, they definitely will.”

Sam practically jumps out of his skin. He didn’t even hear The Captain slide up next to him. She loops her arm through his, and so does Tiffany on his left side. She beams at him, and her teeth are *sharp*. Making direct eye contact kind of feels like staring down an oncoming train.

“Kara, babe, you’re leading. Maddy, watch our six.”

He blinks and they’ve already moved, faster than the human eye could pick up on. Tiffany picks up on his confusion and pats his arm gently.

“We’ll walk you home, Sam. You’re safer with us anyways. Trust us when we say you don’t wanna see some of the things that come out at night in this town.”

“Things? What things? What the hell are you guys on?” Behind him, Madelaine snickers and flicks the back of his head.

“If I were you, I’d show some respect, kid. We’re your final line of defense against the HOA.” Her laugh raises the hairs on his arm, and she shoves him a little. “Walk faster.”

They march on past endless rows of cookie-cutter homes and white picket fences, and something about the eerie light of the dim street lamps makes the girls look distinctly Other. The sound of his feet slapping the ground are the only thing he's aware of anymore. Time is becoming distinctly hazy. Kara comes to an abrupt halt in front of him, and he smashes into her with all the grace of an elephant. It feels like running into a solid concrete wall. A sharp *crack* resounds through the air.

"I think the HOA beat us here." She turns to look at them and her eyes are glowing softly. "But if it's any consolation, your father will never be a problem for you again."

Time starts again. His house looms in front of him, and he tries not to think too hard about the squelch from under his feet when he steps on the welcome mat or the deep red liquid that wells up over his sneakers. The cheerleaders fall back. There's pity in their eyes. The Captain smooths down his jacket. He's starting to feel like something is very, very wrong with this neighbourhood.

"Good luck, Sam," They speak in unison. He blinks and he's alone again.