

A Quarter Lighter — Caleb Rosenfeld

“You’ll never defeat me,” Flamewave cackled, his massive fiery form towering over Hurricane-Man—four stories tall at least, dozens of spindly tendrils of flame lapping off his body. Behind him, everything was burnt, or still burning: supermarkets, arcades, cats in trees, people’s homes, and even comic book stores! Truly nothing was safe from Flamewave’s blazing rampage. But even in the midst of this chaos, death, and destruction, Hurricane-Man stood tall.

“Put down the bus,” Hurricane-Man commanded as Flamewave dangled a yellow bus full of screaming children over the local Handy-Way Gas. “You’re putting innocent lives in danger.”

Flamewave only laughed. “I’ve scorched hundreds of people, and you’re worried about a bunch of whiny brats?” Flamewave peeked into one of the windows to find everyone cowering, scared for their lives. He chuckled, savoring their fear and anguish.

“Children are our future!” Hurricane-Man proclaimed, “Put them down and we’ll see if we can’t work this out like adults.”

Flamewave’s glowing mandibles shone in a devilish grin. “If you want them so bad, then maybe you should catch them!” Flamewave released the schoolbus, letting it tumble, aflame, toward the Handy-Way below.

“No!” Hurricane-Man shouted, zipping into action. He could fly like the wind and strike like lightning, sure, but was he fast enough to catch a whole bus? He zoomed toward the schoolchildren, blasting himself forward with the power of all four winds. He reached out his hand, the bus’ bumper inches above the station’s roof, trying his best to get underneath it in time. At the final moment, in the microseconds between failure and success, Hurricane-Man finally—

“Josh!” Someone rapped on Josh’s bedroom window, and he flung his marker across the room in alarm. It hit the wall, leaving a streak of school-bus-yellow against the cream-colored

wall. Josh's bedroom was a tapestry of markers and paper, action figures, model spaceships, posters, and, of course, comic books, but the stain still stuck out like a tauntaun on Tatooine. He stared at the yellow spot as he heard a bike hit the grass outside his window. He'd have to find a drawing to cover it up later. Josh sighed, scratching his dark hair as he turned to see his best friend grinning his signature galaxy-spanning grin just outside.

"You scared me, Ant," Josh said, unlocking his window.

"Did I make you piss yourself?" Ant laughed as he opened the window, almost tripping through in his oversized shirt, his backpack flopping onto the floor. Ant was smaller than most kids his age, but people knew when they saw the bits of blonde peeking out of his little league ballcap, they didn't wanna mess with the fastest ten-year-old around. "Why do you look so—?"

Then, Ant saw the streak of yellow on the wall and winced. "Yikes," he clapped Josh on the back. "I owe you a poster then."

"Thanks, but what're you doing here? It's not even 4:00 yet."

"How's the issue coming along? Did Hurricane-Man finally take that flame-douche out?"

"Watch your mouth, my parents are home," Josh said. "I thought we were gonna meet at the Fun Machine at 5:00 so I could finish drawing it."

"We won't have time for the arcade today." A smirk crept up Ant's face. "I was thinking we could go to the Dunes instead."

"Why? It's like two-hundred degrees out."

Ant's grin consumed his whole face. "Because..." He unzipped his backpack to reveal a large package labelled *HEATWAVE FIREWORKS*.

"No way! It actually came?" Josh gaped.

"I told you," Ant laughed.

Several weeks back, after Josh had taken in the mail on a particularly mosquito-filled night, a prophetic choir of cicadas set the mood when he'd spotted a magazine plastered with colorful lights sparking in all directions, fonts bursting from the page.

HEATWAVE FIREWORKS NEW '83 COLLECTION—

SET OFF YOUR FOURTH WITH A BANG!

As soon as his bike allowed him, Josh had shown Ant the magazine, and they'd filled in the tear-out with every item they could afford and sent it away in the mail, crossing their fingers that they'd soon see a package much like the one Ant now held.

"Have you opened it yet?" Josh asked.

"Nah, I figured we need a lighter first."

"There's no way my dad'll let me borrow his Zippo."

"And that's why I came before you could sink all your quarters into getting the Centipede high score back from me." He punched Josh on the shoulder, zipping up his backpack.

"Hey," Josh said, following, "I would've got it if you hadn't distracted me with your commentating."

"If the major leagues don't work out, I've gotta get a job somehow," Ant shrugged, already halfway out the window. "Might as well start practicing now."

"So you had to talk through a cup right in my ear?" Josh asked, grabbing his dollar worth of quarters.

"It's the closest thing to a microphone I know." Ant picked up his bike. "Anyway, you should be thanking me."

"For what?" Josh climbed out the window.

“Bringing you so much joy you could hardly control yourself,” Ant said, clasping his hands sarcastically.

“You mean making me laugh so hard I knocked myself right into a spider and blew up?”

“You can call it whatever you want.”

Josh and Ant hopped on their bikes, trudging through the dry overgrowth of the neighbor’s yard, chains rattling as they bounced onto the street.

“So Alberson’s then?” Ant asked. “It’s closest.”

“The Handy-Way has free matchbooks; we can just grab those instead.”

“You really wanna hold onto those quarters, huh?” Ant laughed.

Even though Ant was much faster than Josh, by bike and by foot, Ant always let Josh keep up. Although, no matter the speed, there still wasn’t anything they could do about the Florida heat on a cloudless summer day like this. Before long, Josh’s shirt was soaked through and Ant’s ballcap was a salty tap clogged only by his head. Josh’s legs were starting to get tired, and even Ant was panting in the heavy, stagnant air when Ant cursed and started speeding up. Why did he start going faster?

“Hey, asswipes!” a voice called from nearby, but Josh was already zipping past him. It was Mike Bogans, an all-around jerkwad who looked more like a squash in a red wig than a kid. Josh pedaled harder despite his legs’ protest; this kid was bad news. Held back a grade, he made up for his stupidity with an aptitude for lying and his wicked right hook. For weeks now, he claimed that Josh had lost a bet to him on the Indians–Mariners game last month and still hadn’t paid the dollar he owed him. But it was Ant who’d lost the bet, and he’d already paid the penny-scronger back in ten-cent increments. Josh’s arcade money could make this kid leave for now, but he sure wasn’t giving up his entire stock of Centipede attempts on the word of Mike Bogans.

Josh heard something clatter to the ground behind him. No doubt Bogans had thrown something at him, just like he'd thrown stuff at Mrs. Bogans's traumatized cat when it got stuck in their tree. The sadistic kid wasn't worth messing with. It was only another minute until they'd reach the Handy-Way.

The bell rang as the boys entered the Handy-Way looking like they'd both surfed through bog water. The monotone middle-aged woman working the counter greeted them from behind her magazine, her facial expression dead as Michael Myer's mask. They marched up to the counter, Josh grabbing two matchbooks they kept in a little box.

"Hey, what do you kids need those for?" the counter-lady asked.

Josh faltered, his stomach dropping. The other guy who worked there never asked when they'd taken some before.

"Our parents asked us to pick them up," Ant said, giving his best good-hearted smile, something he was eerily good at. "My dad's Bic ran out and we're having a cookout tonight."

The woman squinted, as if considering this, pausing for one long, arduous moment before she sighed and went back to her magazine. Free to go, Josh sighed with relief, turning the corner to leave. Ant smirked, giving him a little high-five as the door's bell rang again.

"Asshats!" a voice called. "Y'think just because school's over y'can weasel your way outta a whole dollar?" Mike Bogans stood in the empty parking lot like an angry bowling pin.

"I already paid you back, bitch-gans," Ant said. "What do you want now?"

"Nothin' from you, tyke," Bogans said, Ant's brow furrowing. "I'm here to collect a dollar from the twink."

Ant almost dove for Bogans, but Josh held him back, his stomach flittering for what Bogans might do if angered. Josh's eyes were trained on Bogans's massive glove-like fists, and he wondered how many kid's noses he'd broken with them.

"I never made a bet with you, Mike. Why do you keep lying about me?"

"I'd never lie," Bogans sneered. "It's called interest; it's how banks work."

"Then banks aren't fair," Josh said. He knew it sounded stupid as he said it.

"Life ain't fair," Bogans grinned. "Now hand over the money, or I'mma knock both of your teeth out."

Bogans's brows were lowered in an evil look, his flaming red hair making his glare piercing, stark, intimidating. Josh imagined standing up to Bogans, lifting himself up—stood tall and proud, defying evil by looking it in the face, considering all the options, and choosing justice. How many more kids would Bogans hurt in his life? How many more dollars would he lie and cheat his way into? Something had to be done; someone had to take him down.

"He isn't gonna do anything you say, dickhe—"

"Here," Josh said, pulling all four quarters out of his pocket, looking down at the sun-bleached pavement. "Just leave us alone." He dropped the change in Bogans's grimy mitt, his gloating underbite showing. "Let's go, Ant."

Ant glared at Bogans, his fists clenched while the jerk pocketed his winnings.

"Where're you going? To make out in the woods?"

Ant's eyes glowed with determination, but he caught Josh's gaze and his shoulders slumped a bit. Josh just got on his bike and pedaled away, Ant catching up a moment later.

"Why'd you let that piece of shit take your money?"

Josh didn't wanna talk about it, but he knew Ant wasn't gonna let up. "I dunno, so we can go to the Dunes? He probably would've followed us."

"Man, you can't just let people walk all over you." They turned a corner, passing Bogans's house again. "You've gotta stand up for yourself."

Josh sighed. It was easy for Ant to say. At least if he got into a fight he couldn't win, his pursuer had no hope of catching him. Even on a bike, a determined enough Bogans probably could've caught Josh. "We weren't going to the Fun Machine anyway," Josh said. "Let's just try to have some fun with these fireworks."

Ant pedaled ahead of him and stopped, blocking his way.

Josh skidded to a halt. "Hey, what're y—"

Ant's face was stoic. "I was saving this for when you beat my high score again, but here." He pulled a quarter from his pocket. "I found it in the couch. It probably fell out of my dad's pocket at some point."

"Man, I don't wanna—"

"Take it," Ant said, and Josh could tell he meant it. Ant pressed the coin into his friend's palm. "If they're still open, we can go to the Fun Machine once we're done."

Josh smiled, forgetting about the sweltering, shadeless sky for a moment. He looked at the silver coin, glimmering in the afternoon sunlight.

They reached the Dunes, legs aching, sweat trickling down their backs, but determined to have a blast. Dropping their bikes, they took in the scene, just like they always had to do when visiting the Dunes. It was any kid's dream—piles and piles of soft, cushiony sand, some mounded taller than a two-story house, others barely taller than Ant. The abandoned construction

site was splayed over several lots, and nobody was sure what was gonna be built here, but the dry grass and woods surrounding the site told the boys that something was supposed to go here: something for them—the perfect playground.

It was only three years ago when some other neighborhood kids showed them the place. They'd all climbed to the top of the highest dunes and jumped, shouting "hacienda!" to land, unharmed and giggling in the soft sand below. One boy had said the word meant "cowabunga" in Spanish, and since Mexico was a desert just like this, they should use the right word for the job.

Now, on such a boiling day, the lot was totally empty, each grain of sand bright with the light of the slowly setting sun. The boys turned to each other and grinned.

"You ready?" Ant asked.

"Hell yeah!" Josh said.

Within a few minutes, they were throwing bang snaps at each other, chuckling as the little pellets bounced on their skin and popped in the sand at their feet. Ant chucked a whole handful and a barrage of snaps surrounded Josh as he took cover behind a dune.

Then, they were onto the smoke bombs, coating the dunes in dense layers of multicolored smokes. In the thick of it, tossing them across at each other just like the bang snaps, Ant threw one a little too close to Josh, the smoke staining one of his socks bright green. They laughed, Josh trying to see if he could get one of Ant's socks pink.

Soon, they moved to sparklers, waving them around like lightsabers. At one point, their sparklers clashed, and the tops broke off, sparking to the ground, singeing their leg hairs as they both winced and bounced away laughing. Ant even fell over, leaving a pair of craters in one of the smaller dunes, and they laughed even harder.

They debated whether to do the ground bloomers or the bottle rocket next, but as the sky began to darken, the bottle rocket won out, Ant hardly able to contain his excitement for it any longer. It screamed its way up into the air, made a pitiful little pop with a few crackles for good measure, and Ant was disappointed.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Josh said. “My cousin showed me these ground bloomers once. I bet they’ll be even cooler in the sand.”

They were. Spinning in rainbow colors, these things skipped in unpredictable directions, leaving bits of black burn marks in portions of the sand. Josh and Ant quickly decided that they would not be throwing these little buggers at each other. Instead, they made a game out of it—who could throw one over the tallest dune?

Standing side by side, a good distance from a dune that must’ve been twenty-five feet tall, Ant and Josh took turns lighting and throwing the bloomers as far as they could. They’d spark somewhere atop the dune and come spinning back down, shining in the dusk. They zipped like missiles in hot pursuit while Ant and Josh whooped and screamed, running from the fiery flowers’ paths.

Ant decided to throw with his left arm since he was training to be ambidextrous in baseball and thought it would be fairer to Josh. Josh didn’t complain because on the ninth bloomer, he did it! The tiny pink tube sailed over the tip of the dune, fuse still fizzing.

“You got it!” Ant said, and the two of them sprinted around the dune, not wanting to miss the show. The bloomer ignited, bounding down the other side, bouncing up out of the sand, and into the tall grass. They spotted it again, turning the corner just as it made its final skip, and the spinning stopped. Caught in the dry foliage, the spitting colors went from red, to pink, to

magenta, to purple, to yellow, and finally to orange, but the flames didn't stop when the bloomer died. They began to grow, spreading wider and wider, and the boys' eyes went wide.

Josh could hardly move, staring in horror as the flames began to take shape, tendrils lapping in all directions as it covered the grass and trees around. Josh looked at Ant, but he was just as stunned, the blazing fury reflected against his eyes. The form grew upward as well as outward, rising as if summoned until Josh could almost hear its voice—it was cackling, cackling as it towered over him, towering even over the tallest dune. The heat from the sun was nothing compared to the new heat he now felt coating his face. The grass blackened and withered at its touch, only fueling the creature as it consumed.

Josh saw the monster's face curling out of its writhing form. He couldn't help but think of all the harm it could cause. It could burn the Albertsons, The Fun Machine, Mrs. Bogans's poor cat, and even both Ant and Josh's own homes. Their entire world was in danger, in danger of this blazing behemoth, this magmatic monstrosity. Josh looked up to the darkening sky above, searching for help, but the sky was clear, not a breeze on the air.

Josh couldn't have wished for thunder more than right now, something to take this monster down, something to stop it, but it was so big, and it was coming closer.

The monster seemed to be taunting him, calling him a fool.

It was just like his comics—an evil to be stopped. Josh breathed deeply, taking in the air around him. Maybe if he concentrated, his fear would go away. He reached within for the strength of a superhero, fueling his bravery, sparks flying in his heart. He stepped forward.

The monster asked if he would dare defy flame itself. It started to skuttle toward him, but Ant had told him what he needed to do.

Josh stood tall, reaching out, calling upon the wind to stop this horrible monster. He breathed in the air, charging to release a mighty gust as the monster came closer. He called on the power of Hurricane-Man: the winds of the North, South, East, and West, drawing forth a storm in his stomach, lightning crackling in his eyes, but as the monster reached him, it kicked dirt in his face, and all he did was cough up smoke.

The monster called him weak, a puny child with no will.

No, he was going to stop this, and no smoke could keep him down. Josh prepared to charge Flamewave, his feet planting in the sand, and as he took his first step, Ant jumped in front of him, pushing him to the ground.

“Run, Josh!” Ant called, spreading out his arms to protect him from the heat.

The monster screeched and Josh shrunk. “What?”

“Run! Don’t risk your life over something like this. Meet me by the retention pond!”

The monster screeched again, ripping through Josh’s eardrums in a stab of pain, but Ant only screamed back at it. Josh got up off the sand, bleeding from his ears, and began to run, almost tripping as he got further and further from his friend’s cries, battling the beast. He ran and ran, not daring to go for his bike, not daring to look back, not daring to cry for help. He was too afraid, too ashamed. Wasn’t that what Ant meant when he said to “stand up for yourself?” He had stood up; he faced the monster, and he was ready to fight it. Now his eyes watered and his legs buckled beneath him, tripping down an embankment to the edge of the retention pond. Josh sat there and listened.

Smoke billowed in the sky, blackening the last little bit of daylight left. He still heard the monster’s shrieks, distant but just as horrifying. Sirens began to blare, the red and blue lights flashing by him on the edge of the pond. He waited for Ant to meet him there. He needed a hug,

something to hold. Josh sat there clutching the only quarter he had, crying silently in the grass until morning.