

I drove under a night sky washed out by stoplights with my seatbelt unfastened, all four windows cranked down, and the radio off.

I pulled the car onto the shoulder, cutting onto a field where a subdivision would be built one day. The car bumped over grooves in the grass, eventually rolling to a stop in the center of the field where I turned the engine off, letting the lights go out. Then everything went quiet except for the crickets and the creatures of the night chirping and singing and gibbering in the moonlight.

A breeze rolled in as I pulled the key out of the ignition. It dangled in my hand, where it made wind chime noises with the other keys on the keychain before I tossed them over my shoulder and onto the back seats.

“That’s it, then,” I thought. “Better call it a night.”

I creaked the driver’s seat back till it was fully reclined and then closed my eyes. They started to well with warm water.

I kept my eyes pressed shut while imagining those concrete dams that hold lakes back from canyons. How the pressure generates electricity. I pondered this while absorbing power, pure raw electricity, into my body as it lay there with the insects in the dark.

My eyes shot open at six-thirty in the morning to the sound of a hornet circling my headrest, buzzing like a chainsaw in the air. I swatted around my ears, swore, opened the car door, got out, spat on the dew-soaked grass and then swore again, this time while noticing the familiar weight of car keys absent from my jacket pocket. Pocket check: *wallet, phone, mints. Wallet, phone, mints.* No keys.

Then I remembered. Through the glare of a rear window, I saw the keychain bathing in the sun, laying star-shaped on the back seats.

I drove to Shoppers to freshen up for work. Inside, I stashed a bottle of mouthwash and a box of cologne in my jacket and walked out without paying. One of them set off the shoplifting gates which whooped like air raid sirens. I spun around with my arms raised. Like it was all a big joke.

“Go ahead, happens all the time that old thing,” said a younger woman wearing black. She was standing behind a table covered with makeup that was pink, violet, and red.

“Come on—sure you don’t want to strip me down?”

Back behind the wheel I twisted the cap off the mouthwash and pierced the seal with my house key. The mouthwash fumes hit like a gavel.

The scent rose from the bottle’s opening. I held it to my nose, relishing in the biting, sugary mouthwash smell. With it, I felt hopeful about the future, and how Lisa and I would split for good this time, and how I was only forty-two, and how I would meet younger women. Women that sold makeup. The world, from the vantage of an empty parking lot, took on a rosier tint knowing that there was a better life waiting for me and that all I had to do now was show up.

I sipped from the bottle and swirled it one, two, three times until the sting burnt out before swallowing it whole. Then I did it again and then again and then a fourth time.

“I thought we talked about this,” I said silently to myself. I heard the voice of a younger, wiser me reminding myself of the thousand times I had hoped everything would be different.

“Remember what it’s like to hope.” This disembodied wisdom took possession of me as I flicked on the A/C and ran my fingers over my scalp, staring at the hairless man in the visor mirror. Piece by piece, I fingered the last golden strands at the base of my skull. They looked old and frayed, following no directional logic, like burnt leaves of grass. I laughed with my mouth wide open at a joke nobody told.

I leaned the chair back and stretched out, feeling the liquid and its false warmth churn through my stomach as the side of my face pushed into the headrest—the softest and most perfect headrest to ever exist. The cool A/C blew against my cheeks. For a moment I felt like a boy again, transported back home, sinking into my pillowy twin mattress. It was midnight on Christmas eve, and a breeze rolled through the bedroom window that Momma had left open. It was Christmas eve and I couldn’t sleep, my feet restless under the blankets.

I sat up and took a big sip of mouthwash and then an even bigger sip and swallowed them both down at once and then gagged them back up before swallowing it back down again, bile and all. My eyes pinched shut and I bunched everything up tight on my face, toward one central point, making myself look horrible. Seconds passed and the muscles in my face slowly slackened, releasing into a long smile that said everything that needed to be said, though nothing was.

Through the windshield I watched the parking lot fill, storefronts illuminate, and the town come alive. I flicked the tears out from under my eyes. I smiled an animal’s smile, delighted in killing the boy in me that hoped.