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It Always Happens in a Car

BY COITO

8:15 P.M. 0 MPH.

The street is a fishbowl. At least that's what it looks like through the scattered beads of rain on my side of the car. The gas station on the left leans toward me, nudging itself into my vision along with the red of the streetlights. Those shining circles of light remind me of a costume I wore for a dance recital once. Threads and threads of pompous scarlet sequins tightening around my stomach. I hated that thing.

We're on our way back from confession. My mom wanted us to get a good soul scrub in before we go to Christmas Eve Mass next week to watch an eight-year-old play the Virgin Mary in the pageant. So I dragged my feet into the stuffy beige room with the scratchy brown screen and anonymously uttered, "Bless me Father, for I have sinned." Fr. Francis gave me three "Hail Mary's" and a "Glory Be" for my penance. I was supposed to kneel in front of the stained-glass saints and recite them right away. Instead, I walked outside without even breaking the surface of the "holy" water with my fingertips. I abandoned that piece of Catholic choreography long ago.

So now everybody can go straight to Heaven if my dad runs the red light right at this moment and kills us all. I kind of wish he would because everybody is asking me rude questions. I try to ignore them by focusing my eyes in and out on the red. Circles to blobs. Blobs to circles. Then,

"Why are you so different?"

3:32 P.M. 40 MPH.

If the smog doesn't choke you first, the pollen from the orchards will follow closely behind. Not to mention the fact that you'll have to shrink yourself to make room for everyone else. We don't expand our borders here, we only accommodate others. So when a person leaves, everyone's lungs hold more, and we slowly remember how sweet the taste of air is.

This is especially true for the person who leaves.

Modesto, CA is home to drive-thru cigarette stores and dead, yellowed grass that lines the freeways. It's one of those places that has a scary amount of people who boast about being high school sweethearts—the ones who settled down; you know the type. Anyway, the most disturbing part of the whole ordeal is that they don't know just how unsettling their situation is. Not romantic at all, in my admittedly pretentious point of view. I felt this way about the civilized act of "settling" when I was growing up, too. I know because I learned at a young age how beautiful it is to create space. To be within and without. To leave.

The year I entered the third grade, my parents purchased their first minivan, officially entering the realm of mortgage-paying, heteronormative-mind-breeding suburbia. That turquoise van was just absurd enough to suggest nonconvention while comfortably staying within the boundaries of middle class expectation. It didn't take too long for my little, cinnamon-lipped brother and me, clad in overalls, to discover that the backseat, made to fit three people, could recline so far that you could almost lay flat on your back. And, to top it off, there was a window in the roof. A revelation.

One day, I suggested that we lay down in the back for the duration of our trip home from school. So, upon spotting that beacon of turquoise, we ran up, pulled open the sliding door with our peanut butter and jelly fingers, and snuggled into the new car aroma of the seats. My mom probably protested when she realized we were reclining the seat all the way back. But she was already driving and in a hurry and we weren't listening anyway. We were flying.

My eyes were fixed on the brilliant blue blur with notes of white soaring above the window of the roof. I looked over at Albert Joseph—his kindergarten hands were held tense at his side, his brown eyes spilling with joy I could only ever describe as my brother's. Even though my experience of the sky was folded neatly into a rectangle of glass manufactured by Chevrolet, I tasted each molecule of oxygen as if the whole of it were in every cavity of my lungs. For once in my short existence, my view on the drive home was not assaulted by dilapidated farmhouses crumbling in the midst of budding corn stalks and almond trees. Brilliant blues. Notes of white.

We got rid of the turquoise minivan five years later, when my parents could afford the newest form of transportation essential to the suburban home in 2008: a car with a DVD player. These back seats don't even recline. They make you look ahead at a window of a different kind. Albert Joseph stares blankly at it in open-mouthed oblivion, headphones on. I try to remind my lungs how sweet the sky tastes as I look out my window at the downtown drive-thru cigarette store.

11:00 P.M. 0 MPH.

There is no Azealia Banks or Moon Tides playing tonight. There is only the fog, squatting on the rooftops, steeping in this moment of time while we sit in the car. Streetlights line the sidewalks, giving the black asphalt of the road an artificial glow and making the fog shimmer around the edges. They buzz. Rebecca says that it sounds like a mini-golf course. I don't know exactly what she means, but that's what makes me like her observation so much.

Pieces of moonlight give us mosaic vision in the darkness of the car: a receipt from the grocery store in that lunar slice, Rebecca's ring of keys in another. We have reclined the driver and passenger seats so that we can lay on our sides and talk shit about people, like the girl in our history class who pronounces the accented "I" in Salvador Dalí—as if the word ending on an elevated sound indicates the elevation of her character. We know our kind of asshole is far better than hers. Laughter swells in the space between us and settles slowly like the fog outside. I squint into the dark in an attempt to focus on the entirety of Rebecca's face and find her contented smile, untouched by the choosy shards of moonlight, and cannot help but grin to myself. To the world, Rebecca presents a brooding, "punk is not dead" aesthetic. When I see her contented smile—only lips, no teeth, eyes closed—I am reminded that I know something the world doesn't know.

I remember being younger than I am in this moment. In a different darkness, in my childhood bed, I read American Girl's *The Care and Keeping of Friends* by flashlight, wondering who I am supposed to take all these quizzes with. I brought the book to school with me this semester. There are crooked green and blue circles around answers on one quiz—the green for me, the blue for my imagined pal who I was supposed to care for and keep.

But now I'm here and it's 12:47 A.M. The world and its ambiguities are mingling outside of the car. I'm twisting my hand in a touch of twilight, responding to Rebecca as she talks about being a second semester senior, how she can't relate to her roommate who is drinking green tea with laxatives every day, and why she thinks she needs a tattoo sleeve. I am trying to rest in this minute the way the fog is resting on the rooftops, so I mull over all the words floating around the emptiness between us, commit to memory the smell of Aquage hair product mixed with laundry detergent. And I really listen to the mini-golf buzz of the streetlights. Maybe one day I'll know what she meant by that.

8:20 P.M. 55 MPH.

"Why are you so different?"

"I'm queer." They ask so I tell them.

What follows is the kind of silence that takes residence in every organ. I can feel its heaviness, its concreteness, resting in my stomach. My skin swallows every empty second and lies it down in the marrow of my bones. The rain continues to throw itself onto the car. I try to match its rhythm with that of my heartbeat. A boom and a clap. I think someone else, besides me, is crying. But it's hard to tell because I'm really just listening for the booms and the claps, for time passing. For the assurance that I won't be perpetually sitting in this moment—

Rain's scent is sticky. It crawls into the soles of shoes and the scalp of hair so that everything it touches has some memory of those droplets of water long after they cease their free fall from the clouds.

My gray sweatshirt has the rain from that evening in the zipper. I bet it's in the leather of my brother's belt, too. The collar of my dad's shirt. The seam of my mom's blouse. The interior of the minivan we bought in 2008.