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# Burn Rubber

IT BEGINS AS a soft motor purr. Lures her to the garage in the middle of the night, where her car slumps beside her husband's Subaru. She empties the car onto the lawn: her gym clothes, an armful of toys, the baby seat her daughter outgrew long ago, and three bags of stuff for Goodwill. She crawls into the back, where she hasn't been since college when her boyfriend accompanied her home for spring break. They'd snuck out of her parents' house to the nature reserve parking lot. She'd gone down on him as headlights swept through the woods.

Cheerios grind to powder under her knees. The seats are crusted with spit-up. The vacuum gasps. She scrubs the windows until she can see herself in them, the night mess of her hair. She wipes down the dash and hangs a new pine air freshener from the rearview mirror. Her fingers twitch across her nightgown. Her neighbors' houses are dark.

She uncoils the hose from the garage and swamps the car until it glistens. Turns the stream on herself, shocking her hot skin. At close range, the pressure pounds into her, but she welcomes the cleansing pain. In the morning, she will have bruises.

BUMPER TO BUMPER, she sits in silence. There are no new billboards this week, so she reads the old ones. Her silk shirt digs into her armpits. She used to listen to NPR, but pop is easier to digest. Her brain is going dark.

Breathing deep the scent of pine, she turns on Rosetta Stone, which she never has the patience to finish. Her daughter still sings the Spanish songs she learned in day care.

She creeps forward, flanked by indistinguishable hotel façades; chain restaurants; blank office buildings; billboards for box stores, politicians, furniture. One blank except for the words "Your Message Here." The ruler edge of the horizon remains constant, as if she is not moving at all. In high school, she blasted Nirvana with the windows down. In college, she road-tripped thousands of miles across back roads. Now, the car shakes on the highway, and she hasn't driven above fifty in years.

She tours Lincolnwood during lunch hour, snacking on Danish samples from the bakery where she never buys anything. She drives through the

Starbucks and on to the park where the heaving ash trees lull her into a Zen-like state. At Borders, she browses the Self-Help aisle.

BUMPER TO BUMPER on the highway with the windows sealed, she screams and screams.

THE LIGHTS ARE ON in the kitchen, where her daughter is setting the table without having been asked. Only eleven and already so disciplined. She wants to be an archaeologist, a circus performer, a writer, a doctor like her daddy.

Some experts say it's good for girls to have working moms. For her daughter to see her as more than just a mother. She often thinks she should struggle more with work-life balance. Her daughter's every sovereign breath has made her redundant.

She gathers the groceries, leaving one bag behind. It contains five packages of Oreos, dry shampoo, diapers, and cherry-red Abandon lipstick she didn't pay for.

THE PURR THRUMS in her blood. It invades her dreams and turns her body sluggish. Her husband doesn't notice the bruises. They used to walk around the house naked; she'd sneak up behind him as he washed dishes and run her finger up his ass crack. Now, she braids her daughter's hair. Packs her lunch and watches out the window to make sure she gets on the bus okay.

It's a relief to slip into the driver's seat and move toward something again.

AT LUNCH, she curls up on the back seat. Rain blurs the windows. She scrapes the cream filling from an Oreo with her teeth. She is naked beneath the blanket she has stowed here. Her silk shirt—the one with too-tight sleeves—serves as a pillow. She sleeps better in the car than in her own bed, where her husband breathes too loud.

Power lines sway in the rain. She twists the top off another Oreo. Lunch hour ends. She drifts in and out of a dream about the nature reserve. The owls' gaze cuts through the car windows like headlights, the ground is littered with bones. She had been afraid of her own ravenous hunger. At the beginning, she'd kiss her husband until he fell asleep, and then she'd lie awake, her body humming. It had taken years, but she'd learned to hold back. Now she's the one who turns away.

Umbrellas crowd into the rain and car doors slam around her. Tires screech on wet pavement. Headlights turn the insides of her eyelids red. She has never fully appreciated the day's slow descent. It would make a nice poem, best expressed in Spanish. She still doesn't know Spanish.

Her husband calls. She doesn't have to answer to hear his voice, the one he adopts when counseling patients. Take some time for yourself, he'd tell her. But she doesn't need his permission. She twists apart two more Oreos. She should be making dinner. Her husband was raised on meat and potatoes; her daughter's a picky eater. She's forgotten which foods she likes.

THE LIGHTS in the parking lot shut off. She almost wishes she'd brought a book, but it's better this way. She tries to remember how to be alone with herself.

She merges onto the highway, grinding the gas pedal into the bones of her bare foot. The car begins to rattle. At fifty, sixty, seventy, it shakes as if coming apart, groaning in the thrall of speed. She skirts the other cars. Their horns rupture the silence, and the gas pedal jams against the floor. The horns fade into mournful goose calls behind her. Past her office, past her daughter's school, past her house on the cul-de-sac, waving her silk shirt out the window like a racing flag.

AS THE SUN RISES, she glides along Lake Shore Drive from Evanston's putty-colored estates to the South Side's hotels in disrepair. On her left, the lake. She turns on Rosetta Stone. She'd planned to study abroad. Her husband promised they'd travel. But the dog—long since dead—had needed hip surgery. They'd bought a house and had a daughter instead.

She will prevail this time, until she dreams in Spanish. In Hyde Park, she turns around and starts back up Lake Shore, repeating simple phrases. *No entiendo. ¿Te gustaría bailar conmigo? Estoy perdido. ¿Dónde está el baño?* She rolls down the windows, inviting the wind to scramble her hair. The sun heats her head, suffusing the car with the scent of scalp.

She turns on her phone just long enough to see that she has six messages and turns it off again without listening. She orders a cheese Danish with her coffee. Then two. The cashier is too chatty; her words spill across the counter and pool on the floor. She lurches back, as if to protect her shoes. A soft motor purr permeates the bakery, becoming a growl that makes her bones throb. She spins away from the cashier midsentence. The bell above the door jangles behind her as she runs for the car.

In the Borders parking lot, she watches the shoppers go in and out.

She fixes her makeup, slips on her high heels, and checks into Skype for the noon status meeting, which she runs as smoothly as if she were at the conference table. Her team is convinced she's on a fundraising trip. After her daughter was born, she was eager to get back to work, where she was good at something. She can't remember what she'd wanted to be in college. While they talk, she admires how the stolen lipstick sets off her eyes.

SHE SLEEPS in the lot behind the shuttered Stop & Shop. As a teen, she and her girlfriends had hung out here for hours, smoking on the curb and daring each other to shoplift perfume. One evening, a car packed with older boys pulled up alongside them. Her friend got in and they drove away. The girls waited, shivering on the hot pavement and arguing about whether to call the police. They did nothing, until the car finally swung through the lot again, releasing their friend to the curb, giddy and glassy-eyed. She'd wondered, though never asked, what could have made her friend look that way. She pulls her blanket to her chin, breathing in the pine air.

SHE ROCKETS through her neighborhood's quiet zone blasting Nirvana, flouting the ordinance she'd helped pass. She slows before her office to pitch her trash at the lobby window. Parks behind the bushes across from the elementary school. The air freshener is losing its potency. She wraps it in a tissue to preserve the last trace of pine. In its place, she hangs a coconut, aura of the Caribbean. Her daughter gets off the bus laughing, carrying lunch, hair braided. She wants to kick the gas and slam windshield-first into the school's brick wall.

STARBUCKS DRIVE-THROUGH, toward the heaving ashes. She grinds the gas pedal into her foot until the car begins to shake. A rabbit darts into the road.

She swerves, splashing coffee across her legs, and careens to a stop. Tries and fails to resist looking in the rearview mirror where the stunned creature drags itself in a circle. Its hindquarters are crushed, its eyes wide and staring. She should call animal control—or put it out of its misery. She should wrap it in her silk shirt and take it to the vet. Move it out of the road, at least. She opens the door.

It's like blowing a hole in an airplane midflight. She gasps, shuddering. Her hands go white, the road breaks into static. The soft motor purr

becomes a growl, then a roar of blood in her ears. The seat belt digs into her gut. She releases the buckle, but the roaring pressure holds her fast. She pushes against it, swings her legs into the wide-open air and retches so hard she can't breathe. Coffee seeps up her tan slacks. The thump of bass as another car swerves, windows down, around the rabbit and the ash trees and the children playing in the park. The roar, the smell of burnt coffee. Her pants are dry-clean only.

She slams the door. The air pressure seems to level out again, and the roar quiets. Her breathing slows. She slumps against the seat, watching the rabbit crawl for the trees.

A CAR WASH is restorative. She welcomes the thrust of the water, the slap of the rags, the heavy spurt of the hoses. When she signs the bill, she asks if they have pine car fresheners, but there's only bubblegum. She takes three.

She'd never before appreciated the accessibility of everyday things: coffee, cash, fast food, gas. If only bathrooms and liquor stores had drive-through. She pays strangers to buy her white wine and pees in Tupperware. She tosses her toilet paper at the edge of the park. Scrubs her armpits with baby wipes and washes her hair out the window, dry shampoo flaking onto the pavement. Dental gum strips the grit from her teeth. She finds drive-through salads inadequate, but needs the nutrients. She makes the most of what she has, like those shows about confronting the wild with nothing more than a ball of string and a tarp.

She turns down unfamiliar streets, only to end up on the highway again.

The radio dies. At first, she welcomes the silence. Then she becomes aware of her stomach gurgling, her throat constricting. She forgets to breathe and sighs in gusts. The air conditioner whistles. The brake pedal squeaks. Something rattles in the back, but she can't find its source.

She stops for hitchhikers, just for conversation. Most ignore the mess. Some ask what happened to her, and she pretends not to speak English. She only takes them as far as the state line. East is lake. North, wilderness. South, highway. West, cornfields. Throughout years of endless drives to her in-laws', she'd stare at the smear of dead corn, close her eyes and look forward to the next McDonald's.

She watches the shoppers go in and out until Borders closes. She must have missed the status meeting. She hoards her lipstick in the glove compartment. Behind the shuttered Stop & Shop, she sleeps deeply now.

HER DAUGHTER GETS OFF THE BUS. Braids, lunch, backpack dragging her shoulders down. There's too much homework in sixth grade. Its complexity long ago surpassed her ability to help, but she kept her daughter company at the kitchen table. Pretended to read, waiting for a moment she might be useful. Her hand on her daughter's back.

She sits long after the buses clear. Her diaper is wet, but hasn't reached capacity. She's down to one roll of toilet paper. Out of gum.

Bumper to bumper, she cracks the window. It draws in exhaust from the truck ahead.

WHEN SHE TAKES the car for an oil change, the mechanic asks her to wait inside. There's a television and a coffeepot, he says, as if to tempt her. When she says she'd prefer to stay in the car, he just shakes his head and steps aside so she can drive onto the platform. She rises like a Viking maiden on a funeral pyre.

Past hotel façades, chain restaurants, blank offices, billboards, toward the ruler edge of the horizon. She should bust through the state line and drive until she runs out of gas, until she stumbles from the bowels of the car onto unfamiliar ground. Instead, she exits toward Starbucks, Borders, the heaving ashes.

DIAPERS FESTER on the back seat. Hitchhikers refuse rides. Her teeth are going soft, and she doesn't remember the last time she Skyped in to work. She has become intimate with the sweet and sour scent of her body, her moldering, belowground stink. Her breath, her greasy scalp, her damp armpits and ripening vagina, like sourdough bread baking.

She parks across from the school as the buses line up, their windows fogged with breath. The doors open, and as the kids step off her daughter's bus, she almost expects them to go up in flames the second they touch the ground. She grips the wheel, but they file onto the sidewalk and drag their feet toward school. The doors close without her daughter.

She doesn't remember the last time she turned on her phone. She digs it out of a tissue mound, but the battery is dead.

Her daughter is home sick, or missed the bus, or she was plucked from the sidewalk by a stranger, a carful of boys. A motherless child is easy prey.

THE LAST BUBBLEGUM air freshener has faded. Her legs stick to the seat. Her fingers are puffy on the wheel, her nails ragged. She avoids her face in the rearview mirror.

The house is dark. She inches forward, scraping the lawn, straining to see into the living room window that only reflects her own car. It would be so easy to slip inside. She could take a shower, eat a hot meal, watch TV.

Her daughter appears on the front steps. She is wearing pajamas. Her feet are bare, her cheeks flushed. Her hair frizzes around her head. She looks a little lost, as though she's been sleepwalking. Ever disciplined, she remains on the steps. She is not allowed out of the house alone. She rocks on her heels, regarding the car like a wary animal.

It's good for girls to learn self-sufficiency, to have ambitious moms. She should scoop her daughter into the house and administer chicken soup and flat ginger ale. They'd watch cartoons, her daughter's body curled protectively into her own. She should turn off the ignition. Apologize, at least. Push back against the roar. But if she gets out, it will mean she has arrived.

She hits the locks and tears off the lawn, grinding the gas pedal into her foot until it aches. As she rounds the cul-de-sac, she tries and fails to resist looking in the rearview mirror. Her daughter stands on the steps.

BUMPER TO BUMPER, she cracks the window, draws in exhaust from the truck ahead. She's not driving away, but she's not driving toward anything, either. Just driving. Here are the hotel façades, chain restaurants, blank office buildings, billboards. The horizon's ruler edge.