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Guts in a Braid

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The guts laid over the road remind Rudy of mismatched lengths of ribbon, as if the crossing and twisting of the large and small intestines is a braid in a little girl's hair. Rudy, hands stuck to the wheel and eyes trained steady on the road ahead—a familiar position etched into her brain by the edges of her father's voice—prepares to swerve gently around. The leather of the steering wheel warms her palms, and a faint ache in her elbow crows weariness as she rests her arm on the left-side door.

She heads for her parents' house, once her childhood home, to press a final goodbye into the thinning fur of the dog that once could leap over the garden gate to chase the rabbits nesting beneath the cabbages. But death was only patient for so long.

The road, cement and asphalt bleached to a tannish-white from the burden of the sun, highlights the dark blood like red wax poured over a white envelope. As she nears, the haziness sharpens and details, like each black claw on a dusty paw, are engorged. The body was crushed and split by a wheel. A tail ringed in a black and gray pattern bakes in the UV.

And that odor, laced with black buzzard flies and this sinking warmness, slips through the cracks in her doors and digs first through the skin of her nose and then deeper to the cartilage. Her eyes water and muscles tense her lips into an uncontrollable sneer. Rudy swerves.

Rudy once read that certain scents can take one back to the foggy memories of childhood, but—

The stink never left her nostrils. She was six then and it was a hot, humid day that stretched from the morning to the evening like a cat napping out on a sunlit sill. Cars, close enough to rattle the ground beneath her feet, rushed past the sidewalk she stood on. Her father's hand was so big over hers, the leather feeling of his palm warm against her knuckles. She swung her braid from one shoulder to the other by snapping her cheek to either side. Her mother had braided it for her earlier that morning to keep it out of her face for her first visit to the city zoo. But now, with the mangled corpse laid out before her, the twisted hair lay lifeless over her left shoulder like a pair of feet swaying slowly in the breeze.

It was a raccoon, and Rudy did not know what sound they made. The raccoon's face was turned away, and flies flew in orbit around the source of the smell that drew them in. Its coat was both mussed by the humidity and ratty with bits of black blood clumping areas of fur. She remembered the tail, mostly. It was untouched, as though suspended in a time where the attached body's warmth came from the circuit of muscles and not the sun above. Rudy could only think of a stuffie her brother had won her at a passing fair, and how the once

glassy beads of its eyes became cloudy from the press of Rudy's fingerpads.

Her father had grabbed her by her shoulders with this bull-like force passing through his hands and hid her line of sight behind his beer belly. But no matter how quickly he sprinted them over the crosswalk, the body stunk, and that stink, trapped by the sun's heat to become its very own devouring pulse, never left her nostrils. It was her first time smelling that distinct, unrelenting scent of death.

Rudy had cried across the entire length of the street, the tears stuffed straight into the hem of her father's shirt. She pulled away and saw the trail her tears made where the white fabric of his tank top darkened. Her pulled hair loosened at the nape of her neck as the red ribbon holding it together slipped off. At the zoo, watching the gazelles graze and the otters toss in the vibrant morning brought a single, onslaughting thought: how still could they become? How mangled and rotted beneath the glare of a lively sun?

Then the memory snaps, and Rudy swerves and drives on, eyes trained and steady. The roadkill sits in her rearview mirror and takes up a space she speeds far from. But there it stays in the mirror, bones snapping and skin splitting as it only grows larger, gluttonous in the air it replaces, an open mouth gnawing away at all constrictions of time and space until it snaps those too. It's a rotten apple with only the skin left, the worm self-satisfied as it holds its belly in the hollow inside. There are too many teeth now. They line the decaying corpse like corn in a field, pressed deep into the slithering mess of its pink tendons.

Rudy presses down harder on the gas, but the road has become gelatinous and sucking as the world around her melts the same as the mass. Decay comes down fast all around, and who is to say the dog has not yet breathed its last? Who is to say she is not driving straight towards death?

Muscles break free from skin, eyeballs pop from the socket and roll down the road, and the mass that had been a raccoon moves. It scampers or drags, sprints or stalks. It wants and begs to want, unchecked festering only strengthening its heat-struck desire. The mass nears and the shadows cast by the live oaks surrounding the road fracture into black steel fences—the leather of her car turns to rotting flesh—her windows fogging as suffocating heat pulls the sweat from her pores—her breath begins to collapse.

The memory of her father's voice, fuzzy over the phone, breaks through. He had called her last night to invite her to say her goodbyes. He knew the distance between them was great and that Rudy may have to drive the whole night to make it before the euthanization appointment.

That the dog may not make it through the night.

He knew all this, but knew even more so that the dog had been watching the stars the same way he used to with Rudy's cheek resting on his belly.

And suddenly, the scent fades.

And Rudy is alone on the road, the roadkill shrinking in her rearview mirror.