

HIT AND RUN

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IN ONE hand: the platinum, shock-resistant Westclox pocket watch that you've just stolen from the retired Algebra teacher who lives across the hall. In the other, you hold the cold, unwound coat hanger that you'd used to break into the old man's apartment.

You need the time.

As a little girl, a prodigy who skipped grades and shattered standardized test scores, you hated watches. You couldn't tell time and this fact had always been your Achilles. Watches toyed with you: annoying little reminders of imperfection ticking with perfection around the clock, around your wrist. The whole concept of wearing one still reminds you of living under house arrest. And the complexions – they horrified you. Two hands covering a face, giving the false impression they were touching a surface.

It wasn't you. It was them. It was wrong.

Only now, on New Year's Day, were you willing to set all this dread and doubt aside. You had to know, so you stand in the dark, next to your apartment's bay window, rotating your thin wrist, moving the face in a chalky stream of moonlight powdering the living room floor.

You catch a glimpse and whisper, "Chester, 4:27 – time's up."

Chester gets up off the sagging, ripped leather couch your parents had given you, and he steps out of the blue and orange, down-filled sleeping bag. In one long painful pull, he chugs the last eight golden ounces of his St. Ides malt liquor. Chester sets the empty bottle on top of the TV, amid a mob of melted candles, candy, and Evan's broken Nintendo. Chester wipes his mouth on a dirty shirt sleeve. You watch as he moves fluidly across the dry, dark room despite what he's wearing, despite the bulk: five T-shirts, three pairs of socks, jeans, camouflage pants, and a beastly wool sweater.

Chester opens the hall closet and grabs an aluminum bat.

You look out the window at the car parked across the street, then at the angel Evan had made in the snow. You know you shouldn't have let him go outside today, but all he wanted to do was play with you.

"Nat, where'd you put your goggles?"

Chester is on his knees, burrowing into the closet, looking for the goggles. You tell him cautiously, your words coming out in clouds of carbon, that you didn't put them anywhere: he is "still wearing them" – which

is true and false. They were on his head, just not over his eyes, but you don't give him any shit about it.

You're afraid of Chester.

You know he isn't well, that he hasn't been himself since doing time for stealing cars. He's trying to find work, but having a record really hurts his chances in this town. And no matter what he wears or what he drinks, Chester is always a little colder than you. You put on Chester's steel-toed, ox-blood boots. You double-knot them and lay down next to Evan who is ensconced under a pile of blankets. He's asleep and mumbling something. You touch his head.

Evan still has a fever.

You stomp into the kitchen without flipping a switch, not because you like the dark, but because you can't afford the light. Your power was shut off six days ago. You reappear in front of Chester with a meat thermometer. "Ready or not, here we come," he says, putting the goggles over his eyes and kissing the baseball bat.

CHESTER HITS you: in the face, in the stomach, in your sleep.

He's been doing this for almost a month. After getting paroled things seemed okay, but ever since that wide yellow car has been parked across the street from your apartment, things have gone sour.

It got ugly.

Chester stopped using the word "parked" after the first week, so did you after he slapped you for saying it. He said the car was "mocking" him, and he didn't need you doing it, too. During the second week he punched you in the stomach and told you to say that the car had been "abandoned," but you ignored him and tried to stay out of his way. You had other things to worry about, like what you were going to do with Evan. He's almost ten and this wasn't the life you'd promised. Week three, Chester said there was no doubt that the car had been abandoned, but it was now officially "forlorn," and it wasn't mocking him anymore. He was doing all the mocking – then it got worse. Chester would wake you up in the middle of the night with his fists, pounding your back. And Evan saw it. Evan started to understand.

This was the last thing you wanted him to do: make sense.

Then he got sick. It began with a cough. You were thinking, bronchitis, but Chester disagreed. He had

bronchitis once and it was nothing like what Evan had. Chester said Evan had the croup, but he was more worried about the car. Chester had stopped mocking the car and he began to personify, calling it "a derelict," as though the yellow car had lost its job or been kicked out of the garage for not starting in the morning or stopping on a dime. He said it needed help. He said that it was crying out to him to end its suffering.

But you told him to wait.

"Nat, how's the yellow derelict holding up?" Chester asked anxiously, sitting at the table in long underwear, drinking instant coffee. All week Chester rolled out of bed and asked you this question, unaware that he was repeating the previous mornings. But you played along and your reply was always the same. "It's fine," you said after taking Evan's temperature, then checking the parked car's pulse by looking at the calendar, bracing yourself for another blow.

But you weren't humoring Chester. This was your idea.

You'd been adamant about Chester showing patience, some real control by waiting exactly one month before moving in on the car. And he'd agreed, but somehow you'd struck a deal with him, one you knew involved certain consequences — and you'd be the one suffering them. But to you, it was the only way. And from now on you were going to do things the right way.

"**SHOULD WE** wake Evan up?"

Chester stood by the window, in the same spot you'd occupied moments ago, and he's looking out at the car with the bat resting on his shoulder. His words hit the glass and fog.

"No," you tell him. He licks the window.

You stand and put your long bronze hair up in a bun, using the meat thermometer to hold it in place, and pick up Chester's empty St. Ides bottle that's sitting on top of the TV. Outside, you squeeze the fat, glossy neck of the bottle, enjoying how the heat of your hand is changing the temperature in the cold green glass. Chester is already standing by the car, trying to see inside, but the layers of snow and frost are caking the car's long windows.

You look at the pocket watch again and climb onto the hood.

Chester takes this as his cue. He sets the bat on his

shoulder and lifting a leg, he steps in, taking a quick swing and slugs the driver's side mirror up into the balmy night sky. You put a pink, bare hand up to your brow to see where the mirror will land.

It skitters down, ping-ponging onto pavement.

You whip the bottle at the windshield and Chester starts laying into the side windows. A fusillade of glue-white glass fountains around him. You watch all this for a few seconds, then jump down, off the hood. You pull the thermometer out of your hair and squat in the snow, then stab into the left front tire, soaking in a cool pneumatic ecstasy as the rubber releases a wave of stale air. A corner of the car collapses, like it's been holding its breath for miles.

You pierce another tire.

Chester obliterates the back windshield and porch lights from the surrounding houses snap on. Tired, pasty faces materialize in bedroom windows with the hesitation of a standing ovation. You pull the watch from your back pocket. It's only been six minutes — 4:44.

Make a wish, you think.

You look at Chester: flakes of glass ornament his oily black hair and cling to the blue lenses of the ski goggles. You turn back toward your cold apartment and see Evan's bloodless face pressed against a dark window. You make the wish, then make a run for it.