

## Headlights

By Madeline Burns

Jake rounded the corner, leaning into the turn like a plane banking mid-flight. The party had just ended and he felt invincible. The stars played peekaboo through the windshield. He glanced in his rear-view mirror and saw another car approaching. It was a red 2000 Camry with a large dent in the hood. Jake knew the dent was caused by a falling branch during the last ice storm and that the driver of the car wanted a little competition.

“Well then. Let's go,” Jake slurred under his rank breath. There was a red light ahead, a small sticker of red glowing brightly on the black paper sky. Jake pulled into the right hand lane as the Camry approached him on the left. He rolled down his window.

“Lookie who it is!” Carleton leaned over the passenger seat, grinning like the Cheshire cat.

“You up for some fun?” Jake responded, revving his engine.

“Only if you are.”

Jake laughed quickly, tossing his head back and forth. Carleton continued to grin.

“First one to the corner of Summit and Allen wins,” Carleton announced.

“Deal!” Jake yelled as he slammed on the gas, anticipating the changing light. The car surged forward, followed by a crescendo of sound as the car's RPMs topped out in first gear. The car sounded like a violent hummingbird and Jake hummed drunkenly along with it. He shifted straight to third and the hummingbird sound dropped to a snarl that increased in volume and intensity. He shifted to fourth, shifting to the sounds and vibrations of the car as if he were tuning an instrument. Jake happened to think he had perfect pitch.

He glanced in his mirror and spotted the Camry a few car lengths behind him. He swerved into the opposite lane of traffic and around a blue suburban driven by a middle-aged woman with tacky bumper stickers. Jake hated bumper stickers. Carleton was stuck behind the suburban and Jake was now feeling confident in his lead.

A police cruiser suddenly appeared in the opposite lane.

“Hello, Sir!” Jake called, managing to reduce his speed from 65 to 45 before the cruiser passed him. He checked quickly to see the cruiser disappear into the neighborhood and saw the suburban, now almost out of sight behind him, turn off the road. To Jake's surprise, the red

Camry did not reappear behind it.

He turned around in his seat to make sure the rear-view mirror had not deceived him. There was nothing behind him now except the gently receding images of suburban houses lit up with hollow cheeriness. The engine's whine punctuated the stillness like the lone sound of an audience member who claps for a performance a few seconds too long. Jake peered into the darkness behind him, uneasy with the silence and the guarantee of a win. Just then a car swerved into the road ahead of him, forcing him to slow down again.

“You little -----!” said Jake gleefully. The game was back on. He stepped on the gas once more, pulling up to within two feet of the rear of the Camry. The intersection was just another forty yards ahead. They were both doing 70. Jake pulled into the other lane, nearly grazing the right side of the Camry's back bumper. He accelerated forward, reaching 80. Another car's headlights swept around the corner. Jake giggled because he thought the headlights looked like they were dripping light and the light was spilling out onto the pavement like a glass of white wine. He looked to his left to grin lopsidedly at Carleton, but he was blinded by the lights.

Carleton slammed on his brakes. The squealing sound jumbled with grinding metal and smashing glass. Carleton's airbag deployed and seatbelt locked, restraining him from flying through the windshield onto the other two cars which were now entangled like tragic tango dancers. The airbag sighed and deflated. Carleton watched the exhaust of Jake's car obscure the light from his headlights.

“Jake!?” Carleton looked at the two cars in front of him, now mangled scrap metal. “! Jake?!” He scrambled in his seat and looked for his phone. Finding it, he dialed 911. “There's been a head-on car crash on the corner of Summit and Allen Ave. Shit. Please help! Jake! Jake... Jake?” Carleton threw open his door and ran to the wreck.

Jake had reached the finish line first.