

Panic

Arrive Alive Creative Contest 2021

Ryan Topham

Glancing down at the clock on my dashboard, I watch as the green tinted time ticks away the five minutes I have to get home before my ignorant parents wake up to the redundant sound of their alarm and my empty bed. The windshield wipers squeak, worn down and in need of replacement. The squeaks interrupting only the jazzy snares of *Party Rock Anthem*, the rest blaring loud, heavy bass felt deep in my uneasy stomach. Oncoming traffic keeps my eyes off of my illuminated road.

The party was great, and to be truthful, I'd never really "*partied*" before. I think back to the crowd, shoulders bumping, countless arms in the air. The drink Nev passed me, strawberries lingered on my tongue, I knew it was worse. The joint Hannah made me hit, my smoke-filled lungs crying out for help. How I told myself I wouldn't repeat these mistakes.

The sun breaks the horizon, and I pull down my visor with my left hand, my eyes drifting up to watch. Blake's voice fills my car, "Good morning! It's the Blake show with Kelly and Todd! It's 6:12 now, let's send it over to Todd to get a look at today's weather..." Three minutes left, I wasn't sure if I would make it.

My front tires hit the pothole that marks half a mile to go, feeling the instant regret in the pit of my stomach. I pull the steering wheel hard to the left, attempting to guide my back tires to safety

as my mother's voice reminds me to avoid it, and scolding me for not having succeeded. The swerve leads me to a hill, steep but not long. It stands as a mountain in my blurry vision. Headlights blare down on me from the top, calling out refuge to my lost mind. My foot finds the gas pedal, I lean into it, fixing my slowing misaligned car. Vibration followed by a *ding* drags my eyes to my passenger seat, nothing to stop my car from continuing its runaway.

In my ears, the blaring of a horn turns to crackling glass.

Turns to spinning.

Turns to a thud on the windshield, completely off beat with *Juice WRLD*.

Turns to airbags firing.

Turns to a tree in my passenger seat.

Turns to silence.

Turns to confusion.

Turns to emptiness in my head.

Turns to pain.

Turns to the instantly-sobering sound of blood curdling screams.

My breathing slows. My thoughts ease. My vision closes.

...

The beeping of my EKG wakes me, and opening my eyes, I find the dotted ceiling that every innocent child believes they can count; I understand now the impossibility of it all. As reality attempts to flood back into my brain, I try to push myself up, unsuccessful but only for the pulling on my hand. My effort is met with the clink of metal.

Weary of what the truth may be, I glance down, to find a handcuff on my left wrist, the silver glistening in the yellow artificial light. Panic overcomes me, escalating the once steady beeps marking my life, jumping again when a detective enters my view. Incoherent thoughts race through my head.

What happened? What do I remember? A party. A drink. A hit and the following coughing fit. Flashing lights, blue, yellow, red, green. Crowds, moving and swaying to the heartbeat of the music. Music, the sounds of 2000's throwbacks and hard rap, words I know shouldn't be said. Begging and pleading to stay, followed by my insistent denial. My car, candy wrappers in the backseat, otherwise empty, my mind a near replica, void of all thoughts. My phone, tossed in the

passenger seat, face down. My key struggling to find its way to the ignition, the click of metal and a whine of the 2002 engine my only reward for success.

The detective's assertive walk to my bedside brings goosebumps to my skin. Her badge reads *Polis* ; The script fancy, but legible. Her chair swivels under her as she sits, looking down on me without pity.

“Ryan Topham?”

I nod my head.

“You were at a party last night?”

This one takes longer. I'm in denial, but I know you never lie to a cop. But again, I nod my head in agreement.

“You drive a green 2002 Ford Focus?”

This one is easy, of course I do.

“You're under arrest for driving under the influence, and the third degree murder of Aaron Johnson. You have the right to remain silent, anything you sa....”

Nothing registers in my vision, again nothing more than a closing tunnel, but the sounds, a simple name, Aaron Johnson.

It echoes between my ears.

The name is more than just a name. It's the name of my best friend, the one I had been with since we were kids. Dead?

More sober than ever, it all crashes down on me:

Every booze hidden thought,

Every microsecond of the accident,

Every shard of shatter-proof windshield.

I feel my future abandon me for better opportunities.

I am nothing.

And I have no do-over button.