

One Decision. One Life.

By: Faith Connolly

A silver Toyota Camry,
And a freshly eighteen-year-old girl.
She is drunk -
Drunk on life and the endless possibilities of her future.

It's the end of her senior year,
And there are just two more weeks until graduation.
At home, her cap and gown are hanging in her closet,
Awaiting the day when they will finally be donned
Along with a bright yellow valedictorian stole.
It is a small but significant representation
Of the driven, passionate person she has become
From the quiet, apprehensive kid she once was.

Life is good.
Of course, there are trivial matters,
Like dealing with senioritis,
Or figuring out what color dress to wear to her senior prom.
And then figuring out what shoes to buy,
And what color nails to get,
And where she and her friends will get ready.
But that's a matter for another day.

For now, there is only one thing on her mind.
And that one thing is the acceptance letter to her dream school,
Which just arrived on her phone.
After weeks of painstaking work,
Followed by months of eager anticipation,
The moment finally arrived.
She had done it.
The 6:00 a.m. wake-ups, late-night study sessions, and hours spent in the library,
They were all worth it.

And now, for the best part,
To go home to reveal the big news to her family -
Her parents and four siblings.
Her biggest support system.

The ones who have taught her to reach for the stars
And how to not take life too seriously,
Because sometimes,
Kitchen karaoke and late-night ice cream runs are the only things that can fix a bad day.

Across town, her best friend is bouncing around in her room,
Celebrating her friend's accomplishment as if it is her own.
They are the missing pieces to each other's lives,
Fitting perfectly into place in the gap
That once seemed unfillable.
She is the first to hear the news,
As she is the first person the girl goes to tell everything.
In the morning,
They'll meet up at the bakery in town
To share a cinnamon roll and their excitement
For all there is to come in the next few months.
They won't discuss the day that will eventually arrive
When they must go their own ways,
Starting college and a new chapter in their lives.
That is a matter for another day.

The windows are down,
And the crisp night air rushes against the girl's face.
She can smell the dampness of spring in the air,
A sign of the changing seasons
And the passage of time,
Which once seemed to travel at a snail-like crawl
But now blows by in the blink of an eye.
In the background,
Billy Joel reminds her, "Slow down, you're doing fine,"
And for the first time in a while,
She believes these words.

Ahead of her, the dark pavement road seems to be boundless,
Just like the life of possibilities she faces.
And the two blaring headlights heading right for her car
Shine as bright as her promising future.

A blue Ford truck,
And a middle-aged man.

He is drunk -
Just drunk.

A demolished silver Toyota Camry,
And a forever eighteen-year-old girl.
A dented blue Ford truck,
And a middle-aged man who will spend the rest of his life in jail.

There will be no graduation day,
With pictures of the girl surrounded by her family
Who are all beaming with pride.
There will be no cap to throw in the air,
Decorated with the colors of her dream school
That she worked tirelessly to get the opportunity to represent.
There will be no senior-year prom.
No more breakfasts with friends,
Ice cream trips with siblings,
Or peaceful car rides
When the quietness of the world made all feel right.
There will be no more.

There will be no more,
Because a man
And a single decision he made.
A decision that he justified
Because "It's just a five-minute drive,"
And "I've only had three drinks,"
And "I'm a good driver, so I'm sure it'll all be fine."
But it wasn't fine.

One decision.
One life.
An equation that will never add up,
Because there is no fair trade-off,
Nor a value that could replace
The preciousness of life.
A life that will never be the same.
A life that will never again arrive alive.