

Road Paved With Regret

By: Jacob Shvets

Quick sputtering, then ignition—diesel flowed to every inch of the engine, mirroring the alcohol coursing through my bloodstream. The Jetta roared to life. The car reeked of crumpled beer cans and stale chewing tobacco. I had never lived in a reality where I gave a police officer a reason to pull me over—not once. In my eyes, no risk was in sight. I had a radar detector, an invincible bubble formed by the Jetta’s metal frame, shielding me from consequences.

“Who needs seatbelts for a two-minute drive?” I joked. The words were hardly coherent as the alcohol in my system made me smile.

The alcohol had taken over.

“Not me,” Owen responded, sliding into the passenger seat. He tossed two more cans into the cup holder—the thud echoed through the cab like a taunt.

The blue light from my phone torched our eyes as I plugged it into the stereo, cranking up the volume. The raspy, thumping bassline became our lifeline, keeping us awake. My friends had called me a professional drunk driver more than once. I could walk a straight line on a dime and always passed the eye test. To me, this night was just another smooth ride under the stars, ending with a crash on the couch and football blaring on TV.

For Owen, it was his last night alive.

Snap. Crackle. Fizz. The aroma filled the car as fresh hops and malted barley mixed with our foggy breath. Condensation bubbled and slid down our cans like teardrops—teardrops not only on the cans but on my windshield, too. A quick blast of heat would do the trick, right? I

reached for the knob. My eyes left the road for a split second—just a split second. Brakes screeched, but too late. Headlights caught the eyes of a deer in the middle of the road.

There was no time. No way to swerve. The impact sent the deer flying over the hood. Glass shattered. Metal crunched. Time seemed to stop. The car groaned, spinning off the road before slamming into a tree with bone-crushing force.

Everything I had ever done with him flashed before my eyes—hikes with our moms, backyard wiffle ball on the Fourth of July, countless hours spent on the lake. Then silence. Deafening silence. I tried to move, but now, instead of liquid courage bubbling inside me, pain simmered through every inch of my body. Bruises formed, and blood dripped from my face onto the glass-torn leather seats. I forced my eyes open, praying this was just a terrible dream.

“Owen?” I croaked. The bitter taste of blood filled my mouth.

My trembling hands reached out, begging to feel him move, to hear him groan in pain—anything. The cold, sharp wind from the shattered windshield sent a chill down my spine. Owen’s body slumped against the door, eyes closed, body limp. Reality crashed down. He was gone.

I stumbled out of the car, the whirlwind of flashing red and blue lights surrounding me as emergency vehicles arrived. Sirens flooded my ears, but nothing outweighed the crushing blow of my own guilt. Every single face of those who loved him—Owen’s family, his friends, and myself—flashed through my mind. I had taken a life.

Shattered pieces of glass reflected the families I had shattered with a single, senseless choice. There was no going back. No second chance. The consequences of my actions would

hang over me forever. All I could do was hope that sharing this tragedy would make others think twice before making the same mistake. One moment of false invincibility never justifies the cost of a life.