In Headlights

I am not allowed to walk home on the long, dark road that leads through the desert to my high school. My mother has imparted me with images of things waiting to harm me: coyotes and rapists and stray bullets fired during drug deals gone wrong. Most days, when I walk through the heavy iron gates, the ones they keep locked, it is already dark. The school itself, nestled among sand dunes, looks like a prison, despite their best efforts to soften the beige block buildings with greenery and flowers.

Today my mother is late again. I consider for a moment leaving the harsh lights of the parking lot, hearing the sounds of whistles being blown during soccer practice fade away, being blinded by the light of oncoming cars before being plunged back into darkness. The sound of my footsteps, the wondering: *are those mine?* But I lean against the wall and watch the sprinklers shoot water on the grass, browning now with winter, craning my neck to watch the cars that occasionally pass in and out of the parking lot. Eventually, I spot my mother's: a white sedan, nondescript and in need of washing.

I pull the front door open. I could, in theory, learn how to drive. I tell people that I am too busy, that I can wait—I plan on living somewhere where I can walk places, anyways, instead of this rural-suburbia, where the sun beats so intensely. But secretly I am terrified of the thought of my hands on a steering wheel, of the notion that with a small jerk I could send us careening into an equally swift hulk of metal. Here, on the two-lane road, the image rings particularly stark.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey," my mother replies, and I can tell she isn't in the best of moods, "How was your day?"

Truthfully I am irritated that she's late. It took her half an hour to get here—we live a five-minute car ride away. But I don't say anything.

"It was alright," I say, "Had a lot of tests."

"I'm sure you did well." I don't believe her.

We pull from the parking lot. I glance over at her. Her hair, which was long and black when I was young, has been buzzed short and is graying in places. *It's too much work*, she told me once. She is practical; she doesn't wear makeup or clothes that she has to adjust or pull down. I tug at my crop top.

My mother gasps suddenly, and for a moment I think this is it: the second before we die, before the car coming towards us veers over the line and headfirst into us. But when I look up I don't see a car on the road in front of us but something else. She drives into the next lane to narrowly avoid hitting it. She stops, pulling onto the patch of hard-packed sand by the asphalt.

"Is that a…?"

"Tortoise?" My mother finishes my sentence. And it is. It is large, larger than any tortoise I've ever seen, and it's sitting by the side of the road, unmoving.

"Is it dead?" I ask.

"I'm not sure," my mother replies, "But we can't leave it there. It's blocking the road." Before I can stop her, she pulls the car door open and is outside. I consider, for a moment, waiting in the car, but she motions for me to follow, headlights illuminating her. I picture a dark figure emerging from the bushes and grabbing us both, dragging us into the dunes.

Shaking the image from my head, I step outside. We bend down to examine the tortoise—it is massive, almost three feet long. I see immediately that the shell is fragmented,

black blood oozing from the cracks. But as I lift my hand to my mouth, it crawls forward slightly, its limbs straining, and then lowers itself back down.

My mother looks at me. “I guess we have to lift it,” she says.

“And put it where?” I don’t move. She looks back down at the animal.

“It's cruel to just leave it here. It should at least be put down.”

My mother has a habit of finding things in need of saving: our three dogs, antiques to repair, pieces of art. Even our desert tortoise, Aldred.

“Here, you grab this end, and I’ll grab the other.” I struggle to get a firm hold on the creature, my fingers searching for a crevice I can dig my fingers into. On three, we lift, straining. The tortoise is dense, packed into its shell, muscle and meat and bone. I gag at the sight of exposed flesh peeking from the broken shell. We lower the thing gently into the back seat of the car.

“What now?” I ask.

“Take it home?”

I sigh. I sit in the back seat and place one hand on the animal, gingerly, as my mother pulls back onto the road.

“I wonder what happened to it,” my mother says.

“It got hit by a car,” I reply.

“I know,” she says, irritation creeping into her voice, “But how did it end up there?”

We pull into the driveway. I stay with the animal while my mother gets my brother, Parker, and sister, Willa. It is silent in the dark car, and I can hear it breathing. I look away.

“That’s not a desert tortoise,” my brother says, peering into the car. I roll my eyes. But he’s right, it’s too large, its shell is different than Aldred’s, sharper, more angular.

My father would know what kind of tortoise it is. He wrote two books on radical environmentalism before he became a lawyer in this town that my mother hates, where the color green is a luxury.

My mom asks what she should do. I shrug. She decides to drive to Beaumont, an hour away, to the only nearby vet who deals with reptiles. She asks one of us to go with her. No one immediately volunteers.

"I have a headache," Willa says.

"I have an essay," I explain. It's the truth.

Begrudgingly, Parker offers to go. The dogs crowd around my feet after they've left, anxious, and Willa retreats to her room. Quiet fills the house, the soft lighting illuminating the brown and cream colors of its interior, the shining floor, the neatly arranged furniture that all goes together. Having said goodbye to one tortoise, I look for another: Aldred.

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Aldred is one of the many things my mother has collected. The local zoo was looking for homes for desert tortoises, an endangered species, native to the valley. She must have seen an advertisement somewhere. There was a woman who came and surveyed our backyard, made sure there weren't any holes in the fence, that our dogs weren't vicious.

Aldred has a burrow that we made for him, but he never sleeps in it. Instead, he digs his own holes: tunnels underneath our yard, maybe even our house, a maze we can't see below us. He disappears into them for months on end and we think he's gone forever, but then he turns back up, poking through the sand or the patch of grass we keep watered. In between I worry he has burrowed into someone else's yard or that one of his tunnels has collapsed and he's trapped in the darkness. When he reappears I feed him strawberries and Romaine lettuce, watch his

wrinkled neck stretch for my hand and his little beak open wide, his beady eyes fixed on the food.

"He's a dumbass," my mother says often, when she finds the perfectly good burrow vacant and Aldred missing. But I know she worries about him too.

Now, in the dry desert air, I grab a flashlight and check his burrow, built into the side of a hill in our yard, held up by brick and concrete. It's empty. I go back inside, into the coolness of the air-conditioning.

"As soon as you guys graduate I'm moving out of this hellhole," my mother has told me, more than once. She says she misses the color green. I tell her sarcastically all she has to do is look at the beautiful golf courses. She laughs, a laugh tinged with bitterness. But I understand. I, too, would like to leave this place.

During the summers, when leaving the air conditioned interior of our home is an impossibility, when we fry eggs on the sidewalk, when all the water in the world couldn't keep the golf courses green, she rearranges the furniture of our house with violence, picks out things from the garage, keeps the blinds open and lets the sun stream in, like she is daring it to do its worst.

"We're not supposed to live here," she says, angrily, "No one is supposed to live here."

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It's late when Parker and my mom return. My essay is half written, and I hear the garage door open, waiting for the familiar sound of the key turning in the lock. When it doesn't come, I go outside.

Our house is neat, verging on minimalist, but our garage is anything but. Here, my mother keeps old things. Antiques she's found at thrift stores, memorabilia, dust-coated tchotkes,

miscellanea that belonged to my grandmother. They line storage shelves, stuffed in bins or perched precariously on top of each other. Our car fits neatly in the only remaining space.

My brother takes a giant cardboard box out of the car. I peer inside and say nothing. The tortoise is sitting at its bottom, as massive as ever, its wounds covered in gauze.

"It's…alive?"

"Yep," Parker says. He looks none-too-pleased.

My mother's gray eyes narrow a bit, her voice tired. "Well was I just supposed to leave it?" Her question hangs in the air. I want to tell her that I'm sorry. But I don't.

We call the tortoise Sue. My mother forgot to ask for its gender, so we decide it's a girl. We are supposed to pack her wounds with sugar twice a day, and rinse them with antiseptic: a tortoise's shell can heal, apparently. We keep her in the garage to prevent dirt from getting in her exposed flesh.

According to the vet, Sue is a Sulcata tortoise, which is native to Africa. People get them as babies and don't realize how massive they can become, how much they eat, how much attention they require. So they dump them, often, in vacant lots or parks.

My mother drives me to school the next day, the sleep still in my eyes. We pass by the spot where Sue was. I think about bits of shell scattered among the sand. I wonder who did it: who, in the darkness, did not veer quickly enough, felt something scrape the underside of their car, paused for a moment, and kept driving on the long straight road. I wonder if they knew.

That day during my calculus exam, I keep thinking about her, trapped in the dimness of our garage, among the clutter of things my mother has collected over the years. Outside, in the desert, the creosote waves in the breeze.

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After my mother left my father, before they built the high school, we rented a house by the edge of the desert. It was at once too large and too small, its hallways cavernous and its rooms claustrophobic. On most evenings, at dusk, we climbed the fence with our dog: first my brother scaled it, and then my mom handed him the dog, and then she helped my sister. I was always last. She lifted me, her fingers gripping my arms as she lowered me down. For a moment we were separated from her by the brown brick fence. I was sometimes afraid she would leave us there.

In the desert, we found discarded objects, bits of treasure no one wanted: old pins and dilapidated books and articles of worn clothing. We found dead things, too, like old rabbit skulls picked clean by predators and bleached white by the Sonoran sun. We brought these things to her eagerly, and she examined them, her gray eyes searching. Sometimes, if she liked them, she'd keep them.

"There's probably a body buried somewhere here," she said nonchalantly. My mother was always hoping to find a body.

She was always hoping to find something strange or unexpected. I realized she was obsessed with treasure-hunting at thrift stores, places I've grown to hate over the years.

"Just a quick look," she'd say. It was never quick. When I was small I entertained myself by hiding from my siblings among the racks of clothing, secretly hoping that she would be the one to find me. But my mother didn't care about clothing: she was sifting through old furniture, through glass figurines, through paintings marked with the initials of someone unknown. I didn't understand what she was looking for. I didn't know what she would pick.

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I think I've failed my Calculus test. It is not a subject that comes naturally to me. As I wait, after Debate Club, after my requisite extracurriculars needed for college applications, I feel anger bubbling up in me when my mother doesn't come. Finally the white sedan pulls up.

"I'm learning how to drive," I burst out, "Dad is teaching me." I haven't even asked him.

"Ok," she says, "But it's dangerous. Is it really worth it?" I don't say anything. We pass by the dark park, the one with a little divot in the center, which filled up once when I was a kid during a rainy winter. My mom helped us build sailboats out of paper. They floated on the surface for a few moments before becoming soggy and sinking. My mother used to tell me there were alligators in the sewers or bodies of still water (jokingly, maybe—I still don't know for sure), and I remember being too afraid to get close enough to the murkiness to retrieve them.

"How's Sue?" I ask finally, my voice even, the anger draining from me.

"We have to get her hay," my mother says.

"Huh?"

"Hay. The vet said she needed hay. For the garage. And maybe you can help me clean her shell when we get back."

I hold the tortoise steady while my mother applies the antiseptic. Judging by the way she strains forward, it seems to hurt; I push back against her with all my strength. I pour sweet sugar on her. The garage smells rank from her feces and urine.

Afterwards, I peer into Aldred's burrow.

"Aldred is missing again," I tell my mother, as I help her cook dinner. I watch as she cooks ground beef—she inspects every piece carefully for the faintest tinge of redness, a hint of it being underdone.

"I'm sure he'll turn up," she says, chopping an onion roughly, "He always does."

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When I was five my mother decided to scale the purple mountains that surrounded the valley, from top to bottom. She made it her mission. She said she was going to write a book about it. She cut her long black hair short. She grew thin and wiry, she spent all day climbing and training and eating the right foods. She made weird friends: a man who didn't wear shoes on the trail and a woman with only one lung and a guy called Steve. She always ran ten minutes late when she picked us up from the small preschool we attended, and every time it was the same *I'm sorry I lost track of time on the trail.*

Often, I cried when she dropped me off at school. I was afraid she'd stay at the top of the mountain with her strange friends and leave me, us, down here.

Once, my father had to pick my sibling and I up because she was running so late. He was angry, his sighs heavy with irritation. When my mother came to get us they stepped into the other room. He asked her loudly what it was that was so important about the mountain. She spoke in a hushed tone. I couldn't hear her response.

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My father is a talented man but a terrible teacher. He has taught me how to do many things: how to paint, how to cook a steak, how to play the piano. But usually, in the midst of his impatient "No, not like *that*," I end up in tears.

As he sits beside me in the passenger seat and instructs me in the basics, I can feel my throat tightening. I am terrified of pressing the gas rather than the brake, of forgetting how to turn the steering wheel. At my first stop sign we grind to a halt. I wish I had asked my mother to teach me instead.

"*Gently*," he says, grimacing.

"I just don't want to hit anything," I say.

"You're not going to hit anything," he says, "Don't be neurotic."

Don't be like your mother, is what he means.

We drive up and down my street going 5 miles per hour. I clutch the steering wheel tighter each time I see a pedestrian. I don't cry.

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Sue grows stronger. The fragments of her shell begin to fuse together, to cover her pink flesh. At night, I can hear her banging against the garage door, over and over.

At school, I study for the SAT and worry about my grades, make a list of colleges in cities. I catch my mother looking at apartments in San Francisco, near the beach, near Golden Gate Park, where she says she'll be able to finish her novel.

"I'm just thinking about it," she says, "It's not like I could afford it, anyway." I try to picture her living in the hustle and bustle of a city, and can't.

I graduate from driving up and down the street to driving around my neighborhood.

"*Gently*," my father repeats at stop signs. I still brake too hard, and I wonder if I will ever get over it, the fear of not stopping in time.

I feel winter melting into spring. The cold is disappearing. It rains one weekend, so much that the roads become flooded and the sand washes onto the asphalt.

Aldred is nowhere to be found. I picture him underneath our house, feeling his way around in the darkness, sweeping dirt aside with his strong, scaled arms. If he digs enough, perhaps our house will sink into the earth, crushing him. Or maybe he'll dig so far he'll end up on a road somewhere in the middle of the desert.

He'll be back, I think, he always comes back.

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"I think it's time to let Sue walk around outside," says my mother, one day a few weeks after we find her, "Her shell is basically healed, and I feel bad keeping her in that garage all day."

Relief floods me. I have grown tired of cleaning her feces each night, of the sound of her banging against the garage door, of thinking of her in the dimness.

We carry her outside. She wanders, eating grass. My mother and siblings and I stand watching her for a bit, navigating the landscape of our backyard, the shade of our mesquite tree. Our dogs sniff her but seem otherwise uninterested.

As night falls, she finds Aldred's burrow and wedges herself into it. We try to get her out, to put her back in the garage. But she's too far back.

"Oh well," my mother says, "She's happy there."

And Sue is happy. During the day she eats everything, all the grass, all the hay. She prowls the yard, digging mounds, requiring constant vigilance to ensure she doesn't escape. She poops everywhere, leaving piles in our backyard that our dogs track into our pristine home, requiring mopping and sweeping once a day.

One day, we find her mounting Willa's basketball.

"I think Sue…is a he." I say. We have to laugh.

My mother begins searching online for tortoise sanctuaries. There is one an hour away, run by a man who specifically takes in abandoned Sulcatas. He says he will take Sue.

Winter is almost over, and as we load the massive tortoise into the car, sweating, breathing in the scent of filth, I look into Sue's beady eyes. I wonder for the first time what his

life was like before he found himself on a dark road in the middle of the desert. My mother asks if anyone wants to go with her. I hesitate. I have an essay due.

"I can't," I say. She looks hurt. As she is leaving I am struck with a sense of panic, a sense that I should be with her to say goodbye, a fear that I'm not just saying goodbye to Sue, but to both of them. I run into the garage. But she's already gone.

When she comes back, the cardboard box is empty.

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I wait for Aldred to resurface. I wait for the sound of him tapping against our glass door, and ask my mother to buy strawberries at the store. They grow moldy and rot. I wait for weeks, and slowly I begin to feel as though he is gone. No one in the house mentions his name. We clean the hay out of the garage. My mother looks despairingly at all of the items in it, sighing.

"Sometimes, I wish this house would burn down, and all the stuff with it," she says.

One day my mother offers to let me drive home from school. It is dusk, and the sun is gradually moving behind the purple mountains.

I can feel a lump in my throat.

"I don't know," I say, "It seems kind of scary to drive on at night. It's a two-way."

My mom looks at me for a few moments. "You'll be ok," she says, and this time I choose to believe her. I nod and turn onto the road, feeling my foot press onto the accelerator.

I recognize the spot where we found Sue. If this were a movie, I think, I'd crash into something. I'd die in a tragic car accident. I'd enter a space time loop and discover that I was the one who hit Sue and left him by the side of the road, fragmented and broken.

But none of this happens. We drive by the spot, and the sun goes behind the mountains, and the empty road stretches before us.

We pass by the last patch of desert.

“Do you mind if we stop for a sec?” she asks, “I’ll be quick. I just want some sand for a vase, for decoration.” She has been carefully furnishing our house all these years, the one she bought, the one she adorned with all the treasures she’s found and made into something beautiful.

“Do we have to?” I say, embarrassed at the thought of people watching my mother collect sand like a madwoman. She rolls her eyes and laughs, and I do too.

From the car, I watch as she scales a dune, feet sinking into sand, hands clutching a glass jar. Her jacket is wrapped tightly around her. I press my hand against the glass and feel the chill from outside, the remains of the winter. When I look up she’s at the top, and the sun is leaking its last rays. I am struck by the sudden fear that she will never turn around, that she will reach its crest and descend to the other side, where I will lose sight of her.

She crouches down and begins pulling sand towards herself, into the jar. I think of Aldred, constructing invisible shafts underneath our perfect house. Cars pass by, their lights illuminating her, a dark thing in darkness. Then she turns, her hands full, and climbs back down.