

Indifferent

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From behind the pulled blinds, soft light from the cloudy fall day crept into my room. The bland white light reflected off car keys and CD cases; movies and loose change were left carelessly on the floor. I sat in front of a wire-bound black notebook and let my pen tip weave small circles in the air above the paper. A few words lay scribbled on the first line of the page, but nothing came to finish the thought. I peered at the phrase, reading and re-reading it, searching for a finish.

From down the stairs came a shout. It was time to leave, time to go out of state. Vacation. A car ride, a family, and a good deal of time. I'm on my way. Lazily I set the pen down and stood up from the hard wooden chair. Into the pockets of an old pair of heavily worn jeans went car keys, a wallet, and a cellular phone. Before picking up the notebook and running downstairs, my eyes scanned the few words on the page once more.

WHEN LIFE IS THREATENED...

People are always so internal. No matter how a given person acts or speaks, the source of their behavior is uncontrolled human emotion. The pure stuff. Anger, hate, love; that sort of thing. People see and experience this everyday, and still they're led to believe that people act for the good of all, on logical reasoning. No, people have never been able to overcome feelings for the good of progress. Some, of course, are very outgoing; extroverted. They wear their emotions on their shirtsleeves, to speak, drenched in tears. These are the happier people.

I know this because I am such a person; or rather, I *was* such a person. Not long ago, after a tough day at school and a messy fall-out that night with a friend, I laid down to sleep a little after midnight, fraught with worry and anguish. Stress. It'll make you die younger. But I've grown to deal with, even accommodate, stress in my life. It was something more troubling me when I closed my eyes that night and my heart rate slowed.

A dream came that night, seeming longer than the night itself. It was sharply realistic. I was in my high school, walking alone through empty halls. It was dead silent in the building, and while I walked frantically, checking classrooms and side hallways for any sign of life, a storm drew around the building. Thunder crashed and I panicked, running to the gymnasium to escape from windows. Slowly, the building crumbled from the outside in, and lastly, the gym's ceiling fell in, and the shower of basketball hoops and fluorescent lights coming ever closer was my last sight.

The dream was adamant. Every night since, it would start over, from the beginning when I sat up alone and confused in the cafeteria, to the end where I looked above me in terror, my mouth frozen shut as I screamed silently, hands pinned at my sides, incapable of shielding me. Every night I went to bed knowing it would happen again, exactly as it had before, and leave me startling awake, wide-eyed and in a cold sweat.

Since then apathy has enveloped my every emotion. During the night, I scream and panic and fear in the cold clutches of a dream. While awake, I feel nothing. I cannot

understand the emotions of others anymore. They seem rash and irresolute. And I cannot conceive my own.

My roommate asks if I want to drive. He thinks I'm anxious to meet my family in Illinois; that I share his excitement for getting away from campus for a while. He knows that I've been acting strangely lately, or as he put it, "a little off." That's very understanding of him, employing a euphemism that clearly understates my issues. My roommate wants me to feel better; I'm indifferent to it.

I decide not to drive. Watching him fumble to get the key into the ignition, I imagine the car failing to start, leaving us stuck here for the weekend. He turns it and the car's engine hops on healthily. We pull away from the dormitory.

Every intersection we encounter has me hallucinating. At the corner of Main Street and Washington Avenue, a man in his late forties wanders out into the crosswalk and is promptly met by a left turner with no time to stop. While we pass the post office, I see a Corolla stall out, coming to a halt in one of three lanes of fast traffic. The sports car behind it is sandwiched between the stalled car and the cement truck behind it. This is all very unfortunate, I think.

We drive on for a while. A second hour of driving begins to wear at my roommate's attention span. Intent on staying awake, he starts to turn on the radio. As the volume dial turns up, the distance between the car ahead of us shortens. My roommate glances up to see the red brake lights of the pickup less than ten feet away. Our constant speed leaves us just enough time for him to gasp in shock before impact. But even as the metal frame crushes at the front of the car and the dashboard comes back to meet the driver, I sit motionless, unshaken. I repeat in my mind, a thousand times as the accident happens in slow motion, "This is bad. I am scared, I am worried." But I am not.

My roommate still thinks I'm "off" and tries to cheer me up. He's brought discs of my favorite bands, music I introduced him to not long ago. Always a smile when he talks, I can tell all too easily that he's trying to bring out those qualities he's come to appreciate me for. Humor, optimism, open-mindedness. If I could feel anything, I know I'd be missing those qualities. I try, as best as I can, to miss them. To regret their loss, to remember them and feel even a twinge of nostalgia. I am devoid of emotion.

The music comes on; my favorite band's fast-paced hit single from last year. Critics raved about it and teenagers have illegally downloaded tens of thousands of copies of it. I feel no particular way about it. My friend asks, "Aren't you pumped to finally get away from campus?"

I tell him I am. He's not quite convinced.

I shrug and tell him that I'm probably just tired, that I haven't gotten nearly enough sleep this past week. He must recall the countless times I've awoken during the night, screaming with panic. He nods, understanding, and looks depressed over my misfortune. For a second, I think I almost feel assurance. It passes as quickly as it comes, if it actually comes at all. But knowing that *someone* can feel the depression I lack gets me on the brink of feeling.

And then it happens for real. The Audi ahead throws on its turn signal and begins

to change lanes, with our car in its blind spot. My roommate sees the conflict developing and swerves off the road to avoid collision. Behind our car in lane was the minivan of a young family, with at least three kids under ten. As my roommate and I tear off the road, the innocent family continues to drive along safely behind the Audi. For a brief second, I imagine how readily my roommate slamming on the brakes would have reduced the family. Even as our car jolts violently, I wonder if I should breathe easier knowing that they're safe.

My roommate fights for control of the car, but coming off a high way on to uneven grass is less than gentle. The car fishtails and tips, rolling in great, vigorous jolts down into the roadside ditch and coming to rest on its roof. The passenger door is against the ground, so I unbuckle my seatbelt and look for a way out.

I hear breathing, calm and steady, quiet. But it comes from my own lungs. My roommate is silent; he doesn't breathe at all. His side of the car had hit the ground hardest during the roll: it bent inward towards the driver, crushed by the force. The driver's window shattered at first impact, shards of it burrowing into my friend's head as he hit it simultaneously. He bleeds profusely, but he doesn't move. I realize that he is very likely dead. It registers as fact in my mind, and I concentrate on other things.

Cold numbness covers my body as I try to crawl out of the car where the windshield used to be. My hand throbs as I grip the edges of broken glass in my effort, but I climb regardless, numbness replacing pain. I emerge from the corpse of an automobile, expression blank and eyes glazed. My head swarms with objective thoughts, and I collapse on the ground. Not out of hopelessness. Not from sorrow. Not from shock.

I crumple to the dirt and grass and lay there, my blood seeping out of numerous wounds and beginning to pool around me. I don't ask questions, don't demand an answer from a higher power. Slowly my body cools still more, and I lay there, shivering and bleeding, trying to feel anything at all.

Time passes slowly. People gather around the wreckage, shouting to one another and crying, screaming, or moaning. The accident registers as fact in their minds, and their emotions, their feelings react. I watch them for sometime with blurred vision, and nearly feel envious of their reactions. Eventually, a red and white truck pulls in with a big medical cross on it, and uniformed men and women climb out. My roommate limp frame is pulled out of the shattered car and set on a stretcher. I am nearly sure his is dead, though I never see him again. Before, my roommate was living, breathing; he was a friend. And now he's no longer alive. That's all there is.

I close my eyes as the paramedics come toward me, no longer interested in them or any of the others. Suddenly I'm not there, but completely outside of all of it, in emptiness. I hear nothing, see only blackness, and I suffer an absolute cold. Such numbness overcomes me that I feel like an undefined mass, as one item instead of a collection of billions of cells. A proposal enters my mind. It tells me I can wake up in a hospital. It asks me if I want to live.

I think for a while, clearly, as the confusion of the accident is no longer upon me. I consider all that has happened, all that I was before today, and all that I still aspire to

do. Then I waive that line of thought aside, and focus on what I feel. I answer based on emotion.

“I am indifferent,” I realize. The hospital never comes; I never awaken. I am asleep, forever asleep. And in the recurring, terrifying dreams of my eternal sleep, I feel emotion once more.