

Bucolic

by Craig Lancaster

The woman shook her boy. Half awake, he reached out, grasping at her hazy specter in the early morning dark. He couldn't reach her.

"Tyler, get up and get dressed."

The boy agitated in the cocoon of blankets, dropping his heavy legs off the side of the bed. "What time is it?" She didn't answer. She was gone. The hall light lapped at the edge of the bedroom through the open door she had passed through.

The boy walked on the edges of his feet to the dresser and opened a drawer, rifling through it like a blind man. His searching hands found a pair of woolen socks, and he sat on the end of the empty bed, pulling them on.

"Go get him." The man's voice, biting off instruction to the woman, traveled down the hallway to the boy's ears.

"I just have to put on my shoes." The boy fumbled with the laces as his mother came back into the room.

"Come on now," she said.

"What's going on?"

"There's been an accident."

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The boy shivered in the backseat, worn flannel pajamas the only sentry between him and the cold, hard leather of the station wagon. He peered over the front seat at the clock in the dashboard. Four-twenty-three.

He could smell the vestiges of alcohol on his folks. They'd let him stay up till midnight to mark the new year, and his mother had sneaked him a taste of her whisky. He remembered now what she'd last said before sending him off to bed, how strange it sounded. He couldn't recall her ever saying such a thing.

"Let's hope this one's more bucolic than the last."

The gray slate of night still hung heavy in the car as the boy tried to clear his head of his cut-short sleep.

"Is it Trevin?" he asked, and instantly he felt stupid for having done so. Who else could it be? They were all accounted for. All of them except Trevin.

"What happened?"

The woman made a half-turn of her head and reached for her boy over the seat. He put his hand in hers.

"It was a crash, honey. We don't know anything else."

She gripped his hand. The boy looked in the rearview mirror. The lower half of his father's face twitched as he ground his teeth. He looked up and met eyes with the boy. The child smiled hesitantly, trying to send a signal — something, anything, that might give his father comfort. The man looked away.

Outside the car, a frozen morning chipped away at the fading night.

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The white lights and antiseptic hallways of the hospital could neutralize everything except the roiling fear of a fractured family, who until an early morning phone call had been four. Now they were divided — three in anxiety on one side of a wall and one in distress on the other.

A deputy sheriff met them in the waiting room and dutifully delivered an account that told much and revealed little. Trevin, traveling too fast on the ice-slicked county road. Trevin, trapped in his car, which had been contracted by the collision with the oncoming pickup. Trevin, still with a pulse but otherwise unresponsive, airlifted to the hospital.

But what of the rest of it, his father asked, meek-voiced. Where had he been? Who had he been with? Was he drinking? Had he fallen asleep? Did he know what was happening to him?

The deputy held his Stetson and repeatedly creased the brim: "I don't know, sir. You'll have to talk to the doctor about that. I'm terribly sorry."

They heard that repeatedly in the week that followed. The boy had never before contemplated the congruence of the words, the horrible yet perfect way they fit together.

"That's terrible."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm terribly sorry."

* * *

The boy came to his mother and held his chin up. Wordlessly, she worked the tie in her fingers, fashioning the knot. The duty done, she clapped him on the shoulders and squeezed.

"You're a good boy."

He stepped through her vise grip and hugged her around the waist. She patted him on the back and then peeled him away. "We have to go. We'll be late."

They walked out the door, into the sun, joining the man in the black suit. He mashed out a cigarette with his foot and led them to the car.

