

After Prometheus

by David Ackley

Someone has been setting houses afire along the lonely road I follow at night to my job. His method is simple to the point of elegance: He wedges a kerosene soaked shingle between the house's clapboards, lights it with a wooden match and slips back into the dark. The houses are isolated and too far from the volunteer fire station. My commute passes a scattering of charred cellar holes. Usually there are few other cars, and I've taken to watching ahead for the light, hoping to catch his work, alive in orange on the canvas of black sky.

One night, though, the light is in the rearview mirror, flashing blue. After I've pulled over, a featureless figure shines a flashlight in my eyes.

"License and registration...Where you heading?"

I tell him.

He casts the light on the backseat; "What's that?" he says. For a moment, stricken, I can't remember. What had I left back there, a gas can? Prybar? Shingles? A cooler, my lunch.

He waves me on in disgust. I drive away, wondering how he knew it had been me and Charlie and his chemistry set, all those years ago in that dry South Florida field, opening the gift.

