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November 13, 2013

Red

“And suddenly everything, absolutely everything, was there.”
– Ray Bradbury, *Dandelion Wine*

It’s five in the afternoon. The curtains are drawn to keep out the heat, leaving the house in eerie darkness. My family is gathered around the television. A man in an expensive suit grins and tells a woman her father’s rifle is worth at least \$3,000 in the right market. She squeals. Big letters flash on the screen.

I’m not familiar with American television. This is what people watch, apparently. Another big win, this time for the man with the ugly teapot. “Good for something!” he exclaims, and we’re all happy for him. More flashing letters. I wonder if I can requisition those for birthday parties.

The program cuts to commercials. I like the Toyota MR2. College soon. Going to need a car, right? I still have to study for those subject tests. I think I forgot to pack the prep-books. I love the actor in this commercial. He was in... I can’t remember. I don’t think I got around to seeing the movie anyway.

I’m compelled to focus all my attention on the screen. I have this thought that if I’m perfectly unproductive, getting absolutely nothing done, I’ll attain enlightenment. Like I can hit absolute zero and all the wasted space between my molecules will disappear. But I could never be perfectly still. I could never stop working.

Then I hear it, undercutting the screech of rubber on asphalt: a whimper. I think my new Toyota must be travelling so fast I’ve broken the sound barrier, because the advertisement fades and I can’t hear anything but this quiet, piercing whimper.

“I have to go.”

I must’ve been staring at the screen for a long time, because when I turn around, black spots speckle my vision and a headache sets in.

“Where, Mom?” My mother leans over and takes her hand.

“I have to go. Oh, God.”

“She probably needs the bathroom,” Grandpa shrugs, reaching for the remote. Light has leaked in from the confluence of curtain and carpet, and the ground is an unsettling orange. The sun is setting. It’s five o’clock.

“Everything’s fine, Mom,” she reassures.

“Get her to the bathroom.”

“Dad –”

“Linda, I know my wife.”

“I have to go. I have to *go*.” Her voice rasps like sandpaper against my skin. The orange burns. I want to be anywhere but here. Anywhere but in this silent house hurtling towards nothing.

“Dad, she isn’t –”

“I HAVE TO GO.”

The room is suddenly alive. I’m seized by the heat, the ceiling fan, the rough texture of the carpet, the washing machine, the children outside, the espresso grinder, the needles in my left foot as the blood rushes back in. Everything pulsing in rhythm to her erratic breathing. I’ve woken up. Five o’clock. The sun is setting and I can’t remember where I’ve been all day. Why is the sun setting at five o’clock?

I see her. Every detail. Grandpa squeezes her hand. The room swells.

“I love you, I love you, I love you...” he breathes, like a mantra. He’s crying. I need to stay awake. I’m here. I’ve been here all month. I’ve been here, with this family, for seventeen years.

Mom wheels my grandmother out of the room. I see her now: the woman who taught me to paint the folds of a dress, who played jazz on the stereo and sang to lyrics that weren’t in the score. It’s horrifying, being awake. I look at my grandmother and it’s like I haven’t looked at her in years. I forgot time was passing and now it’s five o’clock. She disappears into the shadows of the hall.

Dad has finished making coffee. I’m awake. Standing, slowly, I walk to the window. My left foot is still a bit numb. I open the curtains. With a static prickle the television resumes its usual hum, but I can’t make out the words. The sky has faded into red. It’s five in the afternoon and the sun is setting.