Theodore Baskills, slightly buzzed, trod through the snow and into his forest green Sedan, pulling a cigarette from the insides of his flannel in the same swift motion of sitting down and closing the door behind him. The car was still warm, cooling and settling from having recently been commanded through the squall, and the interior was haunted by the undying odor of stale coffee, purchased two days ago at the gas station and forgotten, once again, to be thrown out on his way back home. Teddy did not want to drive through the snow, not that it was perilous, but it was inconvenient, with Teddy leaving work after a long day renting cars to boring people coming from somewhere boring and going somewhere boring. He had one thought in his mind, like a beacon in a raging storm of banality, that kept him from looking at the clock and watching the hands crawl to a near standstill against the Arctic white.

He had mind to make soup, a delicious broth made from a poky and bulging bag of chicken bones that he had collected over the months and stuffed into the freezer, complete with hearty spuds, organic carrots and celery, and even fresh, authentic parsley, not that freeze dried flaky shit. It had taken Teddy thirty additional minutes to drive from his place of occupation to the supermarket, another fifteen additional minutes to navigate the doomsayers who stock up on all the county’s nonperishables whenever there is a storm, and an additional thirty three minutes to carefully pull into his driveway, drop his bags off, and open a beer cold enough to rival the increasing chill outside.

Only then, after preparing his mis-en-place, did Teddy realize that he had forgotten the fresh parsley. With half the beer consumed and his mind already protected in the warm comfort of his home, the idea of returning to the raucous storm outside was akin to reentering a circle of hell exclusive for those who forget. I seemed like penance, in a way, but Teddy was a stubborn kid and a stubborn teenager and now a stubborn adult, even keeping his mediocre car renting position simply because he was too stubborn to seek something else. Teddy assesses himself, looked at the calendar, and reminded himself how he wanted to start this weekend: soup. It was a humble request, one might say a lonely venture on a Friday night for a bachelor, but Teddy was determined to complete his vision, for if he does not make soup tonight the his entire snowed in weekend will be out of sync, slightly jarred, a creaky door. Besides, he figured the evening traffic would not be as clustered now, and with the increasing rage of the storm he would have to drive more carefully but would not encounter as many drivers on the road, as any sane person, and Teddy was able to look at the situation objectively, would ask their neighbors for parsley, or simply eat leftovers. But Teddy needed this, he needed this soup to warm his bones for what will surely be frozen wasteland weekend, and he needed soup to tell himself that he could and would set out to do exactly as he said he would.

So, Teddy drives through the snow, the window slightly rolled down to allow the nicotine pyre in his cradled fingers to trail a Jetstream of smoke. He navigates the car gingerly, careful not to slip on black ice, paying attention to any snowbanks. Snow assaulted his windshield and the feeble plastic wipers worked double time, like rowers in an old ship cowering to the whip. Orbs of light line his way down the treacherous road, obscured by the flurry. Teddy imagines large beasts in the background, as big as landscapes, haunting over the town with slathered lips or, even worse, not even acknowledging that there are people here at all. Teddy always thought this of mountain ranges, that they were just some sleeping monstrosity so deep into slumber that the world had grafted over it, and one day, one day…well, Teddy was older now, but idea of an eldritch force so vast in intellect and consciousness that the human psyche is but ants in comparison electrifies Teddy’s heart with as much fascinated fear as watching a horror movie. He entertains these thoughts as he pulls into the grocery store parking lot, trudges through the snow, and ignores the clerk’s raised eyebrow that he embarked on this journey through the tundra for a handful of grainy parsley stalks.

Now en route home, and Teddy looked forward to opening another beer and making this damn soup. His car kicks up tufts of snow as it crawls down the side roads, swerving once before stopping at a red light and then regaining composure. There is a divine force out there that will have protected Teddy and his soup-making quest, he knows it, has willed it into being. The light turns green and Teddy inches his car across the intersection, the snow a roaring flurry pattering on his windshield, forcing him to steer hunched over like a curmudgeon. Suddenly a periwinkle-colored phantom fluttered into the road, waving its cloaked arms. As the headlights neared the figure Teddy saw that the phantasm was a frantic woman blockading his path. Teddy slammed onto his breaks and the back wheels of his sedan hopped off the ice, forcing Teddy to carefully, yet sternfully, master the gears of his car like a cowboy reining in a jumpy horse. The peacoated woman was covered with snow, abominable. She ran to the side of his car and tapped on the window, as if alerted Teddy that she was there.

Before she can begin talking, Teddy lights a cigarette and says, “You can’t just run into the middle of the road like that, miss. I almost killed one of us.”

“I’m sorry,” she pulled the hood close to her face and buried her cheeks into the newly lit cigarette, “my car broke down and I don’t have any jumper cables.”

Her hair whips in her hood like tentacles. Without a face half pelted with snow Teddy figures she is probably really pretty, and Teddy realizes that she is a damsel in distress. The woman points to a sleeping hunk of metal hanging askew off the path, half submerged in a snow bank.

Teddy inhaled, exhaled. “Looks like you crashed.”

“I just need jumper cables. Can I bother you for yours? Just for a bit?”

“The problem is more than jumper cables, miss.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s jumper cables,” the woman says, “my uncle is a mechanic down in Philly.”

“You have a jack, a crowbar? Roadside assistance?”

“Unfortunately not,” the woman says, shielding her brows from the icy onslaught. “Would you mind driving me into town? I can manage myself from there, you know, where there is life.”

The prospect of Teddy’s unstarted soup gurgled like a witches’s cauldron in the back of his head. Within the two seconds of her ask and patient waiting for his response, Teddy fought back the urge to explain the inconvenience this damsel was causing him, chastised himself for a misplaced lack of priority and good samaritanism, and, in the seeing her knowing glare that the poor woman knew no one in their right mind would leave anyone stranded on the side of the road in a state such as hers, cursed her for her undying optimism.

“What do you say, mister? Help a girl out?” She almost pouted, and Teddy hated the mirror she was holding up against him up.

Teddy nodded, at once embarrassed by his utter lack of eagerness writ upon his face, and gestured for the girl to hop into his sedan. He moved empty soda bottles from the foot area and in a futile effort to diffuse the acrid smoke that had seeped into his chairs, flicked the complimentary pine scented air freshener that he gives to all his customers when renting a car.

Before opening the door the woman knocks on the window. Teddy rolls it down.

“What’s your name?” She asks through the crack.

“Theodore,” he says.

“I’m Clair,” she says.

She hopped into his car and shook like a wet dog, shaking clumps of snow into her lap. She pulls her hood back and clips herself into the seat. Teddy realized that he had forgotten to reorient the parsley from the passenger seat, and now it is under the girl’s bum, suffocated and crushed. Teddy tried not to think about this, about the only reason why he was out in these circumstances was for this fragrant, yet truly optional, plant. No matter, he thought, it was in its plastic cocoon, a little extra water would do just fine. It could have been worse.

She turns to Teddy and says, “Thank you, Theodore.”

Teddy nods and begins to k-turn, the road being so sparse that when his ruby colored taillights highlight the street there is only scarlet colored snow and the silence of the fresh fall ruined by his kickstarted engine.

“Mom always said not to get into cars with strangers,” Clair says as the sedan picks up a minute ramp of speed, “that’s why I asked your name. It’s like, a way to dispel any bad mojo in moments like these. Sort of like a reverse vampire situation.”

“I’m not too familiar with vampires, aside from Dracula,” Teddy said, his eyes darting around the round, shoulders hunched.

“Vampires can only come into your home if you invite them, so they try to use clever methods to get you to admit entry. I thought everyone knew that.”

Teddy is silent.

Clair looks out the window to catch a breath. She chuckles to herself. “What a day, huh! Started with me getting ready to meet my girlfriends after work and then found myself in a squall and then found myself in a new friend’s car. You know the first question everyone is probably going to ask about tonight, Theodore?”

Teddy does not answer. He envisions washing the parsley, binding it, cutting it on a chopping board, the blade even against his knuckles as the rest of the soups aromatics fill his kitchen.

Clair continues: “Actually two questions. One, is my knight in shining armor handsome and two, was his car some type of van, you know, like a pedophile van?”

Teddy remains silent. He is mentally chopping onions, recalling the beats of his favorite jazz records, anything to drown out the woman’s ramblings.

“And I’d say to my friends, yes he was handsome, but not in a traditional way. Anyone ever tell you that you have an intense look about you, like a popcorn waiting to pop, or a disabled salmon intent on swimming upstream? Very average looking, but you know, in a good way. And the van,” Clair looks behind her shoulder, sees a gym bag, random containers, supplies from the hardware store, “not much of a van but like a typical white guy car. Like someone in sales. Are you in sales?”

“I rent cars,” he said, his knuckles white.

“Anyway, a car like this isn’t scary at all. Vans are scary because they are big and suspicious, they have a sinister air about them, you know. But this car and you?” Clair chuckles to herself, looks out to the wintry landscape as if it were a golden glade, “I could very much be kidnapped right now, ha. But you’re not like, charming in a way that Ted Bundy was, and you don’t have a pedo-van. This is all a compliment. I’m complimenting you.”

Teddy is silent. Her voice is like nails on a chalk board overlayed on creaking wood.

“I mean, what would you do in a van like this,” Clair says, “it’s not big enough to trudge through this snow back and forth. Even if you were to kill me now, it’d take you awhile to get rid of my body, and no offense but you don’t look strong enough to dig through all this snow and then six feet under, you know, so the foxes don’t dig me back up. And you don’t even seem equipped enough, your coat is pretty tattered, I can imagine you as the type that doesn’t need all the nice things, only one trusty reliable coat bought once, like ten years ago, but then again you’d probably just use my coat, even though it’s a bit girly, but if no one is around who cares. Not like I’d need it anyway.”

The main street of town cannot come fast enough. Teddy wonders if this woman has somehow dodged all cosmic forces to eliminate her atoms from the universe; how many cars barely sped past her when she didn’t look both ways, how many railing held for just a little bit longer as she leaned over them, her brain unable to comprehend danger. She was a quokka, except that she was unintentionally mean, which made Teddy’s displeasure of helping a stranger a counter weight to the good karma that he might have earned. He damned this woman for ruining his night, but this was primarily sourced from the nasally voice, her consistent lappering, and her complete lack of filter, like a kindergartener who had not yet been socialized.

“You don’t talk a lot,” Clair says. “You live alone? You seem like you live alone.”

“I’m focused on the road.”

“Anyway, all I’m saying is that if you ever had an idea to kill me just know I have this here,” she pulls out a can of mace, “I can pull it out faster than you can get that pocket knife sprung on me, so no funny business, Theodore. Can I call you Teddy?”

“No,” Teddy says, “I much prefer Theodore.”

“Teddy is nicer. People would probably see you as more casual with Teddy.”

“Why are you so obsessed with being murdered?”

“I’m just saying what could happen, not what should happen.”

“You could have referred to anything then. Why murder?”

“It’s implausible, Teddy, for you. I’m just telling you why so you don’t get it in your head. Letting you know not to take advantage of a needing woman like myself, that I’m smart enough to know exactly what you could be thinking. I’m not saying what you should be thinking.”

The sedan made a careful turn. Snow pelted on the metal shell.

Clair continues, “I’m just saying that someone like you has probably thought about a moment like this. A pretty young girl in distress, completely capable to your whim, and you being…you. The ingredients of the soup are all there.”

The girl saying “soup” actually did make Teddy want to put his hands around her throat, if only for a moment. It was as if she knew what she was keeping him from, taunting him. He said, “You have a rather high opinion of yourself.”

“A healthy ego,” Clair said.

Now Teddy’s knuckles were as white as the blanketing snow. He knows he needs to be good, to get this girl to her destination, but then he is just allowing this behavior to continue for the next person, allowing this draining filth in skin to leech off someone else, using her admittedly attractive looks and fawn eyes as a defense mechanism, activating the same parts in your brain that makes you want to squeeze a puppy until it pops and then hide it away from the trauma of the world.

The box has opened, and Teddy now craves the adrenaline rush of being angry. “Why do you think I would have thought about murder?”

Clair sees this and Teddy feels a little embarrassed for getting so up in arms. “How close are we?”

“No, go on.” The car has slowed, inching to the shoulder of the road.

“Mom always said conversation like this is impolite,” Clair said, her arms wrapping around her periwinkle cloak.

“You fit the profile, is all. You live alone, have a lame car, a dead-end job, and your face is upturned like a salmon trying to swim upstream, I mean I-”

Teddy slams the brakes and almost replicated the exact automobile acrobatics that caused Claire her troubles in the first place. The tires swerve onto the slippery snow, but Teddy knows he is in control. His eyes are staring into the expanse ahead of him, the yellow glow of the main street two-thirds a mile away. A brisk walk, but a journey in these circumstances, however not an Sisyphean task.

“Get out,” Teddy said.

Clair started to chuckle, a clear defense mechanism. “C’mon Teddy I was only joking.”

“Out,” Teddy said again, his knuckles white, his blood boiling.

“Get. Out. I have things to do.”

Clair bites her lip, pulling puppy dog eyes, “I was just talking because I was nervous.”

“Why.” Teddy sighed, exasperated with his own ability to prolong his own discomfort.

“Because…well, you *do* look like a serial killer, but not a handsome one. Like a…like a creepy one. But I take it all back.”

“Get the hell out of my car and hope you don’t freeze to death in your own incompetence,” Teddy said, the words flavorful yet foreign on his mouth.

Clair’s face scrunched and adopted the look of a woman dealt a grave injustice. It almost worked; Teddy did think of recalling his statement, of how much more powerful his posit would have been if he stopped just a beyond a mile and made her think that he was not being petty. Then he thinks he has done enough, put up with enough, and just wants to make some damn soup.

Clair gathered herself and said, “You know what. Fine. I hope you crash on your way back wherever! You seem utterly incapable of making friends you creep. I bet you live in the basement of your mom’s house and your room is crusty-”

“Shut up.”

“-and I bet I was the only girl who has been within six feet of you, and we both know it’s because I’m in need, which someone as chivalrous as yourself would be man enough to understand-”

“Shut UP.”

“-and you look creepy with your boils and your long fucking nose and your wormy lips and combover-”

“SHUT UP.”

“-don’t you raise your voice at me I have my mace ri-”

*Euphoric* is the word that Teddy would use to describe how it felt for the pocket knife to pierce the girl’s throat, just below her chin. Her flesh gave away quickly, and then, as the trachea provided the lovely resistance Teddy pushed a little harder until the side of his palm and pinky finger touched her smooth skin. He opened her like a zipper and her blood dribbled down her throat like a bib, warming his hand. She grasped weakly at the car door with one hand, dropped the mace near her feet with the other, and attempted to pull Teddy’s wrist away, batting at it like a lazy cat. Her eyes rattled in their sockets, her lips no longer plump and batting like energized rubber bands but mouthing words Teddy could not hear. A prayer, maybe, or the alphabet. Teddy ejected his blade and a satisfying squirt of blood arced onto the dashboard.

Teddy felt like a deflated balloon, sighing in the silence, the beautiful sounds of unfettered snowfall. The girl grasped with energy on credit, pawing at the door, leaving handprints of scarlet on the windows, the gear stick. Her body twitched and Teddy wondered if this was the most silent this stupid windup doll had ever been. The arrogance of the girl, to assume that what she said mattered, that it was worth her breath and that others would allow one iota of mental energy to listen. And the irony of it all, or the lack of, considering her prediction.

The girl emitted a low croaking sound as she slinked into the chair, bleeding profusely into his seats. Teddy sighed again, this time because he knew that this is another chore, another task that prevents him from going home and making soup and drinking an ice-cold beer. He damned himself for forgetting the parsley in the first place, even though this was a human error that sometimes could not be avoided. He heard someone say once, “life is what happens when you are busy making other plans”, and this could not be more true here. Teddy backed the sedan up on the empty road, miles of snowy expanse to his right and left, and half crawled half skidded back the way he came, driving in silence as the girl’s craggy moaning turned into a whimper, and then her body finally gave out with the several expected convulsions, the last of the electricity leaving her corpse.

Her car appeared like a beached whale in Teddy’s headlights. Teddy pulled over to the side, smoked a quick cigarette, and got out of the car. He washed his hands by palming a snow bank. How would he do this? The windup doll had offered him some suggestions in her yabbering; he could bury her deep into the ground, underneath all this snow. But this would require hours he did not have or want to use, and while he does have a shovel for these occasions in his trunk, he would become a snowman by the time he was done. And then the car. Navigating one car through this tundra was a hassle enough, but to go back and figure where to hide that broken beast? Teddy shuddered at the chore set before him, wishing his bones would be warm with the perfect broth. He looked over his shoulder at the windup doll, now hanging like a mannequin in the chair, or a dropped marionette. For reasons not entirely concrete, Teddy crossed the empty road and threw open the passenger seat door, the cigarette falling from his lips. He navigated around the girl’s dead weight and positioned himself underneath her armpits. Her periwinkle coat was sticky with blood and smelled like iron. Blood her throat through the zippered opening like a leaky faucet, sprouting little ruby tear drops with as much speed as a syringe. He hunched with his legs and pushed up with his back, which is bad form but Teddy did not mind. She pulled her out of the passenger side, legs uncooperative. Her Uggs skidded across the snow, creating slime trails of blood. The scrunched of her heels and his labored steps fell upon the muted world, the snow melted on his shoulders, disintegrating from the body heat of his muscles and the warmth of the windup girl’s zippered throat.

There was divine forces at play here, Teddy thought, the very same that started here and went all the way back to the annals of his history. Had he not been in a rush to get home then maybe he would not have forgotten the parsley; had he not forgotten the parsley maybe it would have been some other schmuck finding this broad on the side of the road; maybe if he worked at a different job in a different town, actually used his degree and worked to the potential that his mother beat into him by forcing him to fast in that sweaty attic for days, putting all her cosmic energy into the creative engine of her son; the boy was always meant to be an artist, not a rental car clerk at a failing chain. And the girl too; Teddy had no mind to where she was coming from, but surely there was a chain of events which led her to this moment. While Teddy’s own nebulous path was riddled with the BB gun pellets of both internal and external disappointment, the girl’s was probably due to incompetence. Really it’s her fault. Or is it? Teddy figured this was all sort of some grand scheme. It must be. There must be some force that brought their paths on a dual kamikaze.

Maybe, Teddy came to understand, he was the force of divine intervention. Shadows are created with a ray of light beams from the nebula, traveling millions of miles faster than our eyes can comprehend, power to the gazillionths, and its journey is only stopped by the coincident location of someone standing in the street, on the beach, over a balcony. A long, interstellar journey to reach the ground, only to become obscured before the finish line and exploded into darkness, bending like a canoe around a tree after a storm, taking further insult that the galactic ray of light is humbled and taunted by taking the shape of what had defeated it, the lions pelt over the shoulder of the sculpted Olympian.

Teddy rested the girl on the side of her car and opened the driver’s side door. He gathered his energy, flexed his frozen bones. He could not see farther than six feet in front of him, and by now there was ice piling into his boots, in his undershirt, in between the straps of his underwear. He heaves the girl into the drivers seat, leans her over the steering wheel. Was he the ground, the finish line? Was Teddy the end of her long, chattering venture, her life scripted out by some malevolent force to end here, upon meeting Teddy? Was the end of times Theodore Baskills? He just wanted to make soup, goddamnit. Or perhaps, more fittingly, Teddy was the body that moved in the way of those precious few feet before the sunshine hit the ground. The ill-timed coincidence. Yes. That’s all it was. That’s all it was with the others then, too. It must be. Teddy was a force a nature, brought upon them on a circuit that was outside of both party’s power. The girl in Kappa Sigma who rejected him in college, overheard telling her friends that the salmon-faced boy tried slipping something into her drink, she’s sure of it. The neighbor’s dog, baited by a piece of old meat his mother made, and then using the dog as bait for his neighbor, a girl in his grade but always shied away from him on their walk home, ignoring the new urges in his groins, the complex feelings of what he know understood as puberty. Or his mother, who was the hunk of meat, frozen in the extra refrigerator downstairs, where he was never allowed to go because it would have meant he could be seen in the ground floor, where others would influence the “Herald of a new Artistic age” as his mother would say, burping kombucha from her throat with kimchi stained lips.

With the girl back in her packaging, Teddy stepped back, admired the simulacrum of a car accident like a sculpture engages his work from afar, and rubbed some of the blood blossoming from her throat onto your brow and the steering wheel. Teddy suspected he staged a car accident because was looking for a reason to continue moving, to add onto his list of “things to do”, but now, as he stands outside of her busted car, the snow sweeping across them, the windup doll itself reduced to nothing but a prop, he finds that he has nothing left to do. The adrenaline resurges through him, the feeling of having struck someone with his pocketknife unearthing the dark matters of his psyche that have long since taken the parts of his brain dedicated to shame and fear and consequence. The feeling was exhilarating, and all those rushes of his last moments, yes, that is what Teddy called them, *moments*, come back at full force, rounded now by the crumpled mannequin before him. He wonders how he can get rid of the car. The snow of course would stop anyone from discovering it for a bit, but this town was full of long stretches of land that would eventually uncover the vehicle when the snow melts, be it days or weeks from now. The forests were at the edge of town, but the girl’s car did not run, and Teddy’s sedan hardly enough firepower to make it on its own, much less with towing the beached whale behind it in these conditions. How had he gotten away with it before? An unchecked boiler tank upended his childhood home, incinerating the two storied abode with his decapitated mother inside. The very same pressure managed to make its way residually into the pipes of his neighbor, going left instead of right, and detonating underneath the ground of his neighbors while they were looking for their daughter in the backyard, oblivious that both the daughter and the dog were packaged into little Tupperware containers underneath the shed. In college the blood splatters in the alley were washed away by a heavy torrent of rain unexpected and unheard of in the area, a true fluke.

Teddy sits on the hood of his car, lights another cigarette with shaking hands. There is blood splatter on the windshield, on the passenger window, all on the inside of his car as if someone popped a water balloon. Teddy begins to take handfuls of snow and wipe it on the inside of his sedan, getting everything cold and wet, ruining the interior. There, on the seat, is a flash of green and red, Christmas colored, and Teddy picks up the sad stalks of parsley and swears loudly to himself, kicking at whatever surface will provide resistance, clawing the flattened and bloodied parsley because he if he can’t have it, then no one will. He took the beaten parsley and crumpled it in his hands, throwing it into the snow like a used tissue. He stared at the snow crusted booger with his hands on his hips, panting, the adrenaline leaving his body.

Absently he reached into his pocket for another cigarette and as he shielded his open flame from the wind he spotted a light at the end of the road, a dull yellow beacon muted by the falling snow. Teddy snapped his zippo lighter shut and proceeded to get into his car. He put the vehicle in reverse and felt the wheels revving underneath him like a hamster running in place. The terrible screech of wheels tires unable to gain purchase typically meant entrapment, the very idea of a car as a mobile experience nullified, a reminder that the driver is tethered to the vehicle promoted to provide such freedom. Now it was different. The snowbanks engulfed in, his sedan becoming more buried by the snow to the point of paralysis in his time dragging the girl back to her car and his temper tantrum. He should have just left. The beacon of light was far, hardly bigger than a candle flame, and Teddy was glad for the snow in this regard to buy him some time. Teddy jumped from the seat, began shoveling the snow with his hands like a toddler trying to build a sandcastle. After thirty seconds of diminished returns, he geared his head towards the car, where the girl was positioned to have died from blunt impact to her cranium but if anyone were to inspect, they would see pocket in her throat, skin particles of Teddy’s tenses fist. Teddy looked over his shoulder, covered his brows to shield from the winter blast, saw the headlights proceeding the car. He can’t leave, he can’t stay. He just wanted to make soup, goddammit. It was her the girl’s fault for provoking him, the very same divine luck which had somehow averted her incompetent navigation of life from any real danger and led, by some other divine luck, to intersect with a force such a Teddy. Like sunshine traveling light years to reach the surface of an alien planet…hell, Teddy could use some of that divine force right now.

The car was nearer now, slowly crawling through the snow, now a faint outline of a vehicle no bigger than Teddy’s. He thought of getting his pocketknife out, waving down the driver, and slaying everyone there, just to buy him some more time. This would be a foolish endeavor, he knew, and one especially born from the clarity of realizing that there is a sudden lack of options.

Teddy sat on the hood of his car, slowly becoming a snowman, tufts of weather perched on his shoulders. He arms raised as if on a pulley, the pyre raising to his lips, back down again, staring at the dark, snow riddled sky. Soon the car will drive up and the world will be bathed in light and Teddy will have to be faced with an ideological fork on what to do with this newcomer, but Teddy does not suspect that he will be going home anytime soon. As he raised the cigarette to his lips, inhaling with a careful breath, savoring the nicotine, he saw a flash of light in the sky, followed by a loud crack, as if some deity had raised a whip and struck into the nebula. A flash of light illuminated the sky, putting the falling snow into a standstill, molecules frozen into the air, somnambulists forever in freefall.

The wrath of god zoomed across the still sky, forking into hundreds of divergent paths, a brain stem of voltage, roots of the world tree. The lightning lorded over the land, stretching in great wings. The sudden light made Teddy’s close his eyes and shield himself with the back of his hand, the firefly of his cigarette pointing towards the sky like a candle in a storm. An earth shaking boom ripped across the horizon and slammed into the windup doll’s car with as much judgement as a judge’s gavel. The wrath of Thor, or the rage of Jupiter, the angry boom from a Quetzalcoatl. Within seconds the windup doll’s car exploded into a fiery heap, smoldering and creaking, a ruin of its former self. The girl’s positioned body has turned into a silhouette of ash, smoldering in this sudden bonfire. Smell of burning rubber, of burnt hair, of melting electronics permeate the once still air. The ground around the car has revealed itself, the obscuring snow melted by the burning metal, the burning idol now on a platform of its own. Teddy unzips his parka, feels the chill of freshly melted snow in his boots, in the inside of his shirts like a chilly sweat stain. The fire bounced off his eyes, his face twisted in a way reserved for people who had seen acts of god.

Teddy was so engrossed in the phenomena that he had not noticed the car inch its way into view. The driver stepped out of the car. He was an older man with a heavy vest. His face was pink with beady eyes behind a thick set of glasses. He blinked his beady eyes, cleaned his glasses with the hem of his red flannel that stuck out of his jacket like a loose tongue.

Teddy pointed with the cigarette, hiding a smile. “A lightning strike. Can you believe that?”

“An act of God,” said the man, putting on his bottled lenses, “no thunder strikes in this part of the world in…maybe ever.”

“The odds,” Teddy said, “in snow like this, too.”

“Like hailing in July,” the man said, “nothing is impossible, just improbable.”

“Indeed,” Teddy said, putting out the cigarette in a mound of snow. The car was warmer from the bonfire and began to sweat. The snow at the bottom of the treads had started to melt. Soon Teddy will be able to leave, freed from the weather.

“You know the person?” The old man said, nodding his head toward the caving vehicle. The girl’s body had completely cindered to this point, her body transformed into an effigy of fire, a sacrifice surrounded by melting plastic and burnt hair.

“No,” Teddy said, “I was on my way home from a store. Found her on the side of the road. I was going to give her jumper cables but then the lightning struck.”

“Like God was aiming for her,” the man said. He got back into his car, stared at the burning mess from behind his windshield. “Not much we can do, son.”

It felt strange letting the words out of his mouth, but Teddy remembered to act rational. The narrative was imprinted upon him, given to him by some divine providence. All he had to do was follow it. He pretended to stammer, allowing the mental tax of seeing a strike of god upon an unsuspecting force. Humbling, frightening. He asked, “Should I call the police?”

“I’ll handle it son,” the old man said, “you’ve seen enough. Go home.”

Teddy slid off the hood of his sweating sedan and trudged through the snow. It felt good to move. He shook the old man’s hand and could not help but feel like he was shaking a baseball glove. “Thank you.”

The man grumbles. “Could have been you, young man. God was awake today and in this snow he required penance. Think of all those little decisions you make in your life, all those rights and not lefts, lefts and not rights, all to bring you into this chaotic tundra. All those miniature decisions, micromovements, all pushing you down on a timeline that brings you here, to be smote by a force that just makes you want to go to church next Sunday.”

Teddy said, “Could have been you, too.”

“Pains to think, but the logic of randomness holds true. Take care of yourself, son. Get home safe.”

Teddy walked back to his car, his right side warmed by the combusted vehicle. He looks back at the cindering body, recalls the periwinkle coat that had now gone black like burnt bacon. Did she have an heirloom wrapped around her neck, given to her by her grandmother? A ring, perhaps, of someone just as incompetent enough to share legal responsibility in the form of marriage? Teddy wanted a relic, a trophy, if only to offset the cost of the parsley he had lost. He stopped in front of the car, the totem burning, his fingers dancing along the sides of his snow-covered jeans.

The old man yelled out of his car, “It’s alright son, nothing you can do.”

Teddy snaps to attention, remembers someone staring at him, readopts the visage of a shaken man. He gets into his car and, newly freed, begins to drive along the snowy road, inching back the way he came, the long night at his back. The fire is reduced to a smoldering cigarette but before Teddy really allows himself to reflect. It was a thrill to kill, this was of no confusion. Yet, as the windup girl’s body burns to a crisp by a sudden and surprising intervention, Teddy could not help but think about the other times he had taken a life and gotten away with it. He had seen movies and read books where killers are exact, calculating, a mental capacity capable of enduring the worst of stresses. Teddy Baskins was not like that, in fact he figured most people aren’t. The only difference between him and anyone else, the old man, the clerk at the grocery store, is that Teddy does indeed like the kill. The only difference between Teddy and other killers is that Teddy has always been on the favorable side of cosmic luck. The gas leak that took down his mother’s house and the eventually the neighbors cleaned Teddy’s slate, pushed him into an orphanage rather than a mental asylum. The murder of the co-ed, of which Teddy forgot her name but remembered how she made him feel, cleared by a torrent of rain, a flash flood never recorded once in history in the entire town. And now, a lightning strike to cleanse him of any blame, even providing him an alibi.

Teddy grinned. The world should not work in these mystical ways for people like him. A fourth murder, concealed by the unpredictable judgement of the universe. The car crawled along the snow road, windshield wipers working overtime, pounding to the beat of the radio. There was some blood on his seat, some caking on the dashboard. Teddy figured that perhaps, given these coincidences, he was indeed the force that led these women to their dooms. A reverse good Samaritan, perhaps, where he is the ill intent. A perhaps Teddy is overcomplicating things: With the cosmic forces behind him, constantly clearing his name, maybe it was fate as decreed by the Hades for those women to join him in eternal damnation. Maybe Teddy was just an agent, an arbiter. An angel of death.

Teddy returned home and went into his laundry supplies cabinet for bleach. He slapped himself on the forehead, laughing as a reaction to anger bubbling inside him. He knew he forgot something else at the store.