Today is a good day to be alive. It's a good day to wake up at the crack of dawn and leave behind what is familiar. It's a good day to be driving a car that isn't yours, even if it's just a beige Impala with scratches on the fender. I'm flying down the interstate and watching the hood of this car swallow up the road. Everything is bright and beautiful right now, and even the flat terrain of the Midwest looks inspiring. As far as I can see ahead of me, this lane is empty, and a sense of boundless freedom impels me to stomp the gas pedal to the floor. I shoot forward, running up to about ninety-five. At that moment I see a dog at the edge of the road, looking across it. I swerve a little, anticipating a movement that doesn't come. My control of the vehicle falters, and momentum takes over for me. The back of the sedan tries to outrun its nose. For an instant I'm sliding freely, a delicious nausea playing over me. It feels like I'm on the verge of flight, but the tires adhere, and the car rights itself. I laugh like a crazy idiot. I guess I am one. It feels great.

As I drive, home gets farther away. I almost wonder what my parents are thinking, but then I decide that I don't care. I don't hate my parents, I have no reason to. Maybe I even love them, but I'm sure as hell not going to end up like them. Mom is a short, blonde woman with pale skin and a warm, but fragile smile. She took care of me when I was little, and when I was
twelve she got her nursing job. It keeps her fairly busy. She says she likes helping people. Dad
works with computers at the MidWest American Federal Credit Union building. I don’t know
exactly what that entails. His mustache stays neat, but his dark, graying hair always ends up
ragged. He comes home looking a little bored, then flashes a grin as he shakes my hand and asks
me how my day was. Most evenings, he sits on the couch, his glasses on, holding a magazine or
crossword book.

I can’t remember Mom and Dad ever being that close. They were either pissed at each
other over something, I never really understood why, or they just lived with each other. I was
the only thing they were truly together on. I guess that makes me important in a small way.
They want me to be everything I can be. Apparently, that means I need to go to Danville
Community College. It’s conveniently affordable, and only about three miles from Danville
High School, where I’ve spent most of my time these last four years. Getting an education will
make me become a responsible, contributing member of society with a steady job, just like they
did. For what, though? They’re bland and tired and wasted. I know they want it to be better for
me, but how can you expect the same process to give you a different product? I wouldn’t learn
anything. I can’t. I’ve spent all this time drawing breath, but I haven’t lived. I don’t speak
words or think thoughts or see in color. My parents don’t realize it, and they can’t help me or
themselves. Plus, they named me Donald. What the fuck kind of name is that?

Dad walked into my room the other day, and asked me about a party I had gone to the
night before. It was this girl’s birthday shindig, nothing that exciting, so I gave him a generic
“yeah-it-was-fun” and briefly recounted things. He asked about who was there, as if he would
actually know them, and I listed a bunch of kids who I hung out with sometimes. “Nice,” he
said, and sat down at my desk chair with this goofy half-smile. He was quiet for a minute,
staring placidly at nothing in particular. I leaned forward on my bed, held hostage, waiting for him to leave so I could get back to whatever it was I was doing. He finally turned to me.

“I’m really glad that you can spend all this time with your friends. You should, it’s your senior year. God, you’ll be eighteen in a month now…” He shook his head.

“You know, you might never see any of those people again. You’ve got the spring and all summer, but then you’ll get busy, lose touch. It just happens. Sure, you’ve got the Face-thing, but believe me, the older you get, the less time you have to drive around and actually meet people. You’ll be in school, going project to project, and hopefully you get some internships, and maybe you meet someone that you like, and that all takes up your time. Before you know it, you’ll be working, and then maybe you’ll want to go catch-up with Tom or Kyle or somebody, but you don’t get the chance.” He laughed dryly. “Time only goes one way, that’s what I’m saying. Anyhow, I’m glad you had fun. A kid is obliged to enjoy himself. This is the best it gets.”

I thought of those words when I snuck across the street in the dark this morning, past the fire department, and over to the Freyman’s yard. They’re a retired couple, and they vacation somewhere warm every other spring. This was such an occasion, so no one was home. They used to pay me to feed their cat on these vacations, and for that purpose, they showed me where they kept the house key, under that old cherub statue by the garden. I found their car keys on the kitchen counter then went back outside, still walking on tip-toes. That Impala was in the driveway, and in a minute, I was gone. I crossed the Illinois state line, and now I’m on the other side of Indiana. Tomorrow, I’ll figure out where I’m going.
I’m driving in the gray morning light. On my right, I see a farmhouse, solitary among the fields. Its driveway is empty, and the back door hangs open. Beyond a backpack’s worth of supplies, I haven’t done much planning for this impromptu road trip. I’m lucky the Freymans’ car had almost a full tank. I need gas money, and this seems like a good place to look, so I cautiously steal across the patio. It’s quiet and dark inside. Rummaging through the closet I find a handbag, and in it, a wallet, plus a few loose bills. Forty-seven bucks total, not too bad. In fact, it’s really good, until grandma wakes up in the living room. I had mistaken the sleeping woman for a pile of shawls and blankets. She sees me and screams her octogenarian head off, and I watch her frantically trying to dial up the cops, but those newfangled buttons on the cell phone are too small for her to make out. All the while, she threatens to shoot me with her son’s hunting rifle. Despite the circumstances, I want to laugh a little, but I’m too tense. I’m unnerved, this being my first attempted burglary, but I get my head together and simply walk past her. I sprint out of the house and don’t dare to look back until I reach the road and hop in the car. It’s time to keep going. I drive an hour east and fill up in Dayton, Ohio. Instead of leaving town, I decide to lay low for a day.

That night, I sit in the back seat and reminisce. I never tried to steal money before, but I have had some experience with criminal mischief. I think of Emilio.

We met one summer, almost eleven years ago, and started hanging out a lot. Emilio tended to be either a complete goofball, or kind of an asshole, but this didn’t stop me from liking him. He listened, he smiled, he was always genuine, and he was never mean-spirited. He just liked to poke around and start trouble. He taught me to bike, and the two of us would ride around town together, although my mom always reminded me not to leave the neighborhood.
After knowing him about a month, Emilio showed me how lock-picking worked. The occasion was to mess with Jeff, this kid we knew from school. I don’t know why anymore, but we had decided to take a fluffy, stuffed bunny (his sister’s) and cut open its soft skull. We poured red food coloring all over the wound, making it look real gruesome, and wrote a cryptic note to go along with it, all the while chuckling at our ingenuity, the way seven-year olds do.

Emilio said we should leave it in Jeff’s room, right on his bed, “waiting” for him. I loved the concept, but didn’t see how we were going to sneak in to deliver our twisted gift. I asked him, and he said “Like this.” He reached in his pockets, from which he produced a screwdriver and a strong, bent wire; the improvised tools of the thief. We broke in the next day, while Jeff’s family was out to dinner. Our mission was carried out smoothly, in just a few exhilarating minutes.

We did a lot of silly shit like that. Our crimes were usually less serious than breaking and entering, just sneaking into movies and the like. My life went on like that for a while, and I loved it. However, the things we love have a nasty habit of not lasting.

We always outdid ourselves on Halloween, and the year I turned thirteen was no exception. The night culminated with us commandeering a golf cart and riding it around the Danville Country Club. We coasted over hills and slid across the greens, dressed like a couple of zombies and laughing our asses off. We had been ambitious that year, and it ended up costing us. Someone called the owner, someone else called the cops, and the ride ended quickly. After that incident, my parents told me I couldn’t hang out with Emilio anymore. They thought he was a punk, anyhow, and had been discouraging me for a while. He had moved to a different part of town the year before, and we didn’t have classes together, so I didn’t see him for nearly a year. When I started high school, we would run into each other in the halls every once in a while, but
that was it. He would say “Hey Donny, what’s up?” and I’d say “Nothing much,” and maybe we asked each other how class was going and laughed about old escapades, but we never really said anything.

I didn’t see him at all when I came back to school the next September. I wondered if he moved away or something, until I heard a rumor from a friend. I found Emilio’s sister one day, and she tearfully confirmed it. On the weekend, I biked over to the corner of Vermillion and Voorhees street, quite close to Springhill Cemetery. I found a cross on the roadside, and a bouquet of flowers leaning against a bruised telephone pole. I sat there for a while.

From Dayton I head south, through Cincinnati and Louisville. That afternoon, I get off the Kentucky Turnpike and stop in a small town called Bennet Park.

I’ve parked the Impala in front of a hardware store, and I decide to walk around. There’s not too much here. I see a white church steeple rising over some people’s homes, all of them old and packed together. Depending on the quality of maintenance, some homes project a quaint, cozy feeling, while others are ugly, dilapidated, and unsettling. There’s a small convenience store down the street, and in the other direction, somewhat apart from the rest of town, is a diner. It’s one of those cute, old-fashioned ones, with silver panels and electric signage, although it’s not lit up right now, and its exterior looks dismal on a cloudy evening like this one. However, the inside is illuminated. Warmth seems to flood out of its wide windows, and I see a handful of people sitting in the booths.

I could go for a real dinner. I haven’t had one in three days, just energy snacks and McDonalds. Since yesterday, I’ve got cash to spare, on account of a few people with loose wallets, and a man who paid me twenty dollars to wait in line at a bank for him. I enter the diner
and place my order at the counter. While I wait, I see this girl over in a booth. Straight, reddish-brown hair runs to the middle of her neck. I see her face when she looks out the window. She’s got a snub nose, high cheeks, and a few freckles. Looks cute. I haven’t really talked to anybody since leaving home. Come to think of it, I haven’t had a good conversation with anybody for a long time. I’m not sure if it’s because there’s nothing good to say, or because there’s no good people to talk to. Whatever the case, I feel like I could talk to this girl. My food comes, and I walk over to her booth.

“Hey. Is anyone sitting here?” Slightly surprised, she looks up from her phone. Her eyes are green, but finely speckled with blue-grey.

“Um, no. It’s empty”

“Yeah. You’re not waiting for anybody?”

“I was. Do you want the seat or not?”

“Oh, yeah. Yes, thank you.” I sit down quickly, then feel that delayed rush of stupidity that comes from not knowing what to say next. She evaluates me with an indifferent smile and mercifully cuts into the silence.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” It’s a question, but with the frank authority of a statement. I get the feeling everybody knows everybody here.

“Nah. I just drove in.”

“And what would make you want to drive here?”

“Well, I wasn’t going here specifically. More like, passing through. Not that I don’t want to be here, it’s a nice town and all. How do you like it here?”

“It’s nice. That’s about all. How do you like where you’re from?” She says it like a subdued challenge. There is an irony to her words, but it’s mischievous rather than cynical.
"I guess it’s nice too," I say. She smiles and nods at me.

"So, are you driving back from college or something?"

"I’m not in college. I’m just like, on a road trip, sightseeing and stuff."

"Oh, in Bennet Park? Good for you." She winks a pretty eye at me.

"Well, it’s just a stop. I’m going to go all over the place."

"Mmmh, just a bunch of vague places?"

"No, like… New York. Miami. Maybe LA. Anywhere I can get to." She shoots me a skeptical glance, and I wonder if I’m a total moron.

"And how are you going to do that? It doesn’t sound like you have a grand plan."

"I don’t need one."

"Well, aren’t you confident. What about money?"

"I do a little work here and there. I find opportunities. People are pretty generous."

"Wow, awesome. Not many people embrace the nomadic lifestyle in this day and age. And you’re not in college right now?"

"No. I’ve never been."

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen, almost eighteen."

"Oh, you look older. Did you graduate?" I shake my head. "Do you have parents?"

"Yeah, everybody does."

"Then what made you decide to be a traveling hobo?"

I laughed. "I never really thought of it like that. It just seemed like the thing to do."

"You don’t think like ordinary people." She peered out the diner’s window. "But I guess that’s not a bad thing." There was a pause.
“So, who are you waiting for?” I ask. She glares at me.

“Some friends. We were going to have dinner, but they can’t make it now.”

“Oh, too bad.”

“Whatever, I’ll see them tomorrow.” She glances at her phone. “Hey, I’ve got to go soon. Nice talking though. You’re an interesting person.” She rises gracefully.

“Yeah, it was good to meet you.”

She’s walking away, but turns back. “Do you miss where you’re from?”

I think for a second. “No. I don’t think I will.”

“I wonder if I would. Anyhow, hope your trip works out.”

Next morning, I’m moving east again, weaving through local roads. Last night’s clouds became a storm, and the day is bleak. My clock says twelve, but it feels more like five in the afternoon. I get that grim feeling of being almost finished, of still having time, but only enough to think about everything I haven’t done that day, and wait for a quiet, forgotten ending, an inevitable disappointment. It’s a dreary twilight. I drive a few more hours, watching the wet gray sky fall on me. The line on the road drifts. I realize I’m half asleep, so I pull over. I relax, gain some clarity. I put my feet up on the dashboard and stop thinking. Soon, that vain, waiting feeling dissipates. I’m still tired, though.

A steadily approaching siren jolts me to alertness. Panic envelops me. Should I start the car? No, I wouldn’t get anywhere. I just sit anxiously, contemplating everything that could go wrong. A heavy moment passes, that siren getting louder all the time. A state trooper car appears, red lights flashing, and speeds by me. Its wobbly screams croak and die in the air, but I’m still freaking out. This wave of anxiety won’t pass.
It's only a matter of time until they're on to me. My parents know I'm gone by now, and there must be people looking for a missing kid. The simultaneous disappearance of a car in the same neighborhood may tip someone off. Then, they've got a string of thefts and sightings to follow south. It's only a matter of time. I rev-up the car and fly back onto the road with a sweeping u-turn, so that I'm going away from the cop, back in the direction I came from. For a second, I swear I can hear the siren again, so I drive faster.

By nightfall, I'm back in Bennet Park. I swing into the parking lot of the convenience store. I hope I've avoided pursuit, but they could still be out there looking. I can't be sure. All I can do is worry. I'm breathing heavily, as if I ran here, so I tell myself to calm the hell down. I need to stay cool and figure out what's next. I decide I should make up for this wasted day.

The pale light of the convenience store shines alluringly. There aren't many people out at this time of night, and I know there's no police in this town. I compose myself and walk to the store, hood up to ward off the cold rain. It also conceals my profile. I push open the door, exhaling. I feel a little more together. I've got this. A clerk stands behind the counter like a bored sentinel, and gives me an uninterested glance as I enter. He's an old guy, tanned like leather and sporting a scruffy white beard. He's got intense, black eyes, and a thick brow, drooping with fatigue. I bet he's lived here for most of his life. God, it must be tiring.

I look around and mentally high-five myself for good timing. Besides me and the clerk, there is only one person in the store. On the other side of the building, there is a petite woman wearing a wool cap. White wires run up to her ears from her jacket pocket. I casually move to the back aisle of the store. The clerk isn't watching me, so I slip a few bags of beef jerky off a hook. Moving on, the shelf's contents are gradually swallowed up in the bulk of my jacket and sweatshirt, until I have as much as I can carry inconspicuously. I'm rounding the back aisle and
ready to move out. As I come to the front of the store, fate throws me a bone. The old guy leaves the counter and walks through the employees’ door. I guess he trusts me. I spin on my heel and look around. The woman is at a magazine rack, still listening to music. I’m cautiously excited. I look back to the open register, and decide to go for it. I glide over like a wraith, arm outstretched, jaw clenched, stomach light, and I reach into the tray. As my finger touches a fifty, I hear hinges creak behind me.

“Hey!” says an enraged voice.

The old guy crosses the threshold pointing a large revolver at me. Overreacting a little, aren’t we? Something seems off about him, possessed. Disrupting the sanctity of his business place, I have awakened a primal reaction in this man. He grits his teeth in a psychotic grimace. I can see in his eyes that he isn’t hesitating. He’s aiming. With a handful of bills, I throw myself down behind the counter. I see lightning flash in the barrel, followed by a thunderous explosion. Another blast comes in quick succession.

“Not so tough now, eh? I’ve been waiting for this, you fucking scum!”

This man is bat-shit. Out of every improbable place in the world, I had to be here, stealing in this guy’s shop. I’ve never thought about it before, but I really don’t want to die in a convenience store. I could accept the soft bed of my luxurious mansion, a speeding jet fighter, a lover’s arms, a gladiatorial arena, the peak of Mount Everest, the center of Stonehenge, et cetera. Many places would be more suitable for death, but as far as I’m concerned, this store is just marginally better than a dirty gutter.

I know I have one chance to run, but the door is too far away. He’s walking around the counter now, his shoes knocking against the floor unreasonably loud. He’s raising his arm to gun me down. The hammer clicks back. There is nothing between me and that hot barrel and
his hollow, fanatic eyes. The moment gives us a strange intimacy. The woman at the magazine rack is in the middle, trying to back away into the shelves. Fuck it, one chance.

I launch myself off the ground and run directly at her. I grab her by the waist with one arm and throw the other around her shoulders. She yells and starts trying to throw me off, violently shaking her body. One of her earphones falls out, and auburn hair spills out of the cap. I recognize the girl from the diner.

The old guy holds up his gun, but his hands are too shaky to aim.

"You spineless son of a bitch! I’ll kill you twice as hard!"

"Don’t do it!” I yell, holding her in front of me.

I’m backing towards the door, and the old guy follows at the same pace. He quickens, and tries to edge around me. I’ve got to get out of here. He’s leveling the gun, but then I turn and dash at the door with a surge of adrenaline, hefting her in my left arm. I’m through the door and out into the night. That crazy bastard aims a shot through the store front. I hear glass shatter and the bullet ricochets off the asphalt less than a yard away from me. He rushes outside, still aiming at me, but I’m on the other side of the parking lot, right next to my car. I get in and drive off, racing along a darkened road.

I have a companion now, a partner in crime, just like I used to. Even with everything getting so complicated, it makes this running feel less lonely. The girl is sitting in the back seat, her arms crossed, looking out the back window, occasionally turning to look up at the driver’s mirror. I realize that I don’t know her name, and wish I could have initiated introductions rather than being an awkward piece of shit yesterday. I’ll ask when it’s a good time. Right now, I’m doing seventy and winding around turns by the light of my high-beams. It’s dangerous, but also kind of fun. I love the feel of g-forces.
“Slow down!” She screams at me. It seems like she’s not grasping the situation we’re in.

“I can’t, they’re catching up!” I yell back.

“No one’s there! You’re going to fucking kill us!”

“Can’t you hear the sirens? They’ll catch us!”

She doesn’t say anything, just sits and looks at me. She must still be shook up over the guy with the gun and all that. I keep driving. I don’t slow down until the sirens start to fade off. I make a gentle turn past wild country fields, onto a tiny road. I’m cruising along comfortably, easily.

“So, we never really introduced ourselves. I’m Donny. You know, from the diner. What’s your name?”

She is silent, still staring up into the driver’s mirror. Guess she needs time to relax.

“Well, I just figure that since we’re on the run together and all, we should get to know each other.” I glance up at the mirror, and see that she has turned away. “But feel free to tell me later if you want. Take a nap now or whatever.” She glances at me, but stays quiet.

I drive a little further and see a dirt road snaking off into some trees, still bare and lifeless. We’re pretty much in the middle of nowhere. After a minute rolling along this decrepit path, I glimpse a house through the trees. It’s old and forgotten, perhaps the last remnants of a farmstead. It still looks sturdy enough to crash in.

I open the back door to help her out of the car, but she’s being really grouchy. She kicks my shins, actually, so I carry her to the house and put her in a closet. I tell her that everything’s all right. She just needs to calm down. I spend a while trying to get her to talk, but she’s still speechless.
“Can’t you talk to me? Am I that bad? Come on, that maniac might have shot you if it wasn’t for me. Hey, come on, we’re okay. Do you want a blanket? No? Yeah, no, it’s whatever. How about an Almond Joy? I got one…

I really don’t get you. Can you lighten up a bit? This is a goddamn adventure. You don’t have to kill time in a boring little town anymore. That’s all gone and done now. I’m going to go everywhere, see everything, and you get to come with me. All I want here is someone to talk to. Please? Why won’t you talk to me?"

She doesn’t look at me, either. Nothing I say seems to reach her. It’s frustrating, like talking to a wall, or screaming into space. I want to keep sitting here talking, hoping that she might say one thing. Just talking would be enough, but I’m too washed out. I figure that we both need a night of sleep, so I go out to the car and settle in. I’m out fast, but I can’t stay asleep. Every time I close my eyes again, I hear a siren.

Morning takes its sweet time coming. When the sun appears faintly, I roll out of the car to watch it. I drag a dusty chair out to the half-collapsed back porch and sit down. I put my legs up like an Indian, a relaxing, meditative pose. It actually feels good out here in the cold.

I try to remember the last few days and… nothing, really. As much as I try, it’s all a blur. Instead, my thoughts run way back, and this sweet, pathetic nostalgia overtakes me and slowly drips down into the pit of my stomach. On one of those warm, bright days, like everyone keeps in the back of their minds, I can see Emilio and me leaning on our bikes and laughing. In montage, we shoot down East Fairchild street, grab a slushy from 7/11, jump a fence somewhere, and skid into my yard back on Crystal road. Mom waves at us, and invites us to go in and have some fresh brownies. My dad is on the front porch, reclining with a paperback spread open in his right hand. The cover looks like some kind of swords and sorcery thing. He smiles up at me.
as I pass. That stuff may have been one day or many, but it was real once. Was that the best it gets?

Suddenly, a loud crash breaks my reverie, and I run inside the farmhouse. I look down the hallway and see the closet empty. I had put a large desk in front of the door last night, but I guess she’s more tenacious than I thought. I rush outside. I see the girl standing in the road. I call out to her, and she looks back at me. She raises one hand to give me a middle finger, and with the other, waves her phone above her head. It’s then that I hear a high, whining pitch carry over the air, coupled with the sound of an approaching engine. She stands and smiles at me, then waves goodbye. I don’t try to run away from the sirens or follow her. I feel like my day is done, and it’s time to go home. I do call out again, though.

“What’s your name?”

My shout is met by an insolent breeze, primordial, apathetic. It’s seen this shit before. Only the siren bothers to answer me, but its impotent voice falls flat on the chilly air. All I’m aware of is her distant face. I shiver. The trees shiver. The girl walks away.