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Still in the Dark

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Still in the Dark

Roth had never grown up and didn't have a clue how. He suspected that everyone his age had learned some secret allowing them to transcend immaturity and selfishness. Seeing them hold down jobs and take care of their kids was like watching a magic trick, and if he just knew the secret then he too could do it. But the trick eluded him; so, lying in the back seat, he kicked the car door one more time.

Nobody had passed by the window for a while and he felt comfortable closing his eyes, but he could still see the streetlights through his eyelids. He had never slept in his car before. Again he pushed against the door with his feet, sliding himself upright. He looked out the windshield and saw a woman in a velour tracksuit—that sickly baby pink color that always looks stretched too thin—with two children waddling behind her into the Wal-Mart.

Roth opened his cell phone. 1:30 in the morning. He scrolled through the short list of names in the contacts. He saw Katie's name and deleted it. He thought about calling his brother, but he didn't have the number. He saw

“MOM” and “DAD” typed in all caps.

“Hello,” the voice said, gravelly from interrupted sleep.

“Hey, Dad. It's me.”

“Roth,” his father said, pausing. “What's wrong? What time is it?”

“Late.”

“Are you okay? Did something happen?”

Roth heard his mother in the background. The line went quiet, then Roth's father said, “What to you want?”

“Nothing. I shouldn't have called. Tell Mom I'll call soon.”

Roth watched the screen on the phone dim then go dark. He tried to recline again. When he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket, he hit the ignore button through his pants.

He fell asleep and woke up still in the dark. He couldn't sleep there; even

through his thick wool coat it was too cold. Every time a truck drove by its headlights illuminated the cab in Roth's car. He got out of the car and sat on the trunk. A middle-aged man wearing pleated shorts stepped out of the R.V. in the next parking row. Roth waved at the man, but he just stared at Roth for a second and went back inside. Roth got into the driver's seat. He started the car and stared out the windshield. The woman in pink came out of the store, but she didn't have her children with her. Was it the same woman?

He turned off the engine. He watched her go to a rust green Ford pick-up truck. He couldn't remember if that was the same woman and, after watching her drive away, thought he would let it alone. Then he heard a knock on his driver side window and jumped. A teenager, thin to the point of scrawny in his oversized pants, motioned for him to roll down his window.

"Are you bothering other shoppers?" the man said in a nasally voice. The man had on a blue smock and a little radio hanging around a belt loop that threatened to drag his pants down farther.

"Excuse me?" Roth said.

"We got a complaint about you," the man said. He stood up straight and folded his arms.

Roth looked at the R.V. in the next parking row and saw a slat of blinds drop. "Look, kid," Roth said.

"Kid?" the man said, cutting Roth off before he could continue. "I am shift manager and 22 years old. Sir, we have received a complaint about you bothering other people in this lot. If you do not leave I will be forced to call security."

Roth laughed.

The man pulled his radio from his hip, lifting his pants up over his ass. "Mikey, come to the end of the lot, we have a disturbance," he said.

Roth drove through the city. The buildings and streets blended together and repeated like bad wallpaper. Strip mall. Dunkin' Donuts. Pawn shop. Another strip mall. Without thinking, he drove home. He parked and watched

the house. His bedroom was dark, but the kitchen light was on. Roth muttered a soft “fuck” and wondered how often he had asked Katie to make sure the lights were off in the house just as he had done yesterday. He remembered the way she stiffened and turned away to straighten the room. “Why do you talk to me like that? I don’t like it when you speak to me like a child,” she said. “Because,” Roth had said, “I’m the one who has to act like an adult.”