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I distinctly remember the acidic, sweet fumes from an exhaust pipe. It is engrained into my childhood like Saturday morning cartoons and mac and cheese. I used to put my thin arms by the tailpipe of vehicles to feel the moist, hot air blow the wispy white hair across my tanned and thin arms. Old cars have the best smell. The partially-burned gasoline and carbon give it a thick, sticky feeling that makes it cling to flesh like a toxic blanket. It never occurred to me that it could act like a poison.

My friend's mom died in her garage when I was ten. She used a hose going from the exhaust pipe of her car into the driver's side window. Anxious suffocation filled her mind as the carbon monoxide robbed her red blood cells of oxygen and asphyxiated her brain. A tingle started in her extremities, crawling its way through constricted vessels like a spider through a garden hose. Her lungs coated with fumes from her car.

The air was cold and filled with the yellows, reds, and browns of falling leaves. It was the kind of day where everything smells stronger. The musty scent of leaves decayed into brittle fossils, and the scent of wet grass hit my face alongside a breeze that promised snow. My father and step mom were heading to Kalispell to pick up a new car, and I imagined what its exhaust would smell like as we pulled up to my friend Russell's house, which sat in the evergreen forested neighborhood outside of town.

They dropped me off at Russell's parent's two story log house with my Gameboy and Pokémon cards in-hand. The house had a concrete walkway bordered by bushes, which lead to the front door, to chestnut-stained logs and a maroon roof. I'm sure my father said something about having fun and when they would be back from Kalispell, a simple "See you soon, son," as he straightened his mustache with the black comb he always had in his pocket.

I remember standing outside on the street with a clarity that haunts me. It is one of those memories that act like a beacon at the end of a trail in the metaphoric, simplified version of life—a turning point where nothing

feels or appears the same anymore. I remember the aspen trees along the side of the house. I remember the golden leaves trembling in the wind and the small upstairs window of Russell's bedroom. But I can't picture the garage. Memories morph with the passing of time; each time you remember something from the past your brain changes little details to create a collage of half-truths. I know the garage was there, but when I try to place it in the picture in my mind, it doesn't fit.

I went inside the house and smelled garlic, butter, and marinara. I suddenly felt hungry but wanted to go upstairs and see Russell. His mom was sitting on the couch, her eyes unblinking and glued to the TV. She had dark blonde hair and when she smiled, it warmed my entire body, made any childhood apprehension of being away from home fade. At the time, I didn't notice anything wrong with her behavior. I didn't notice her tangled, unwashed hair or, most of all, the silence. Russell's dad was in the kitchen cooking in his awkward, methodical way. He had wavy red hair like Russell and a tall, thin frame that made him look like a giant matchstick. I moved my eyes to the stairs and rushed up to the room Russell shared with his younger brother.

It was bright—so bright that when I think about it now, I see myself squinting and shading my eyes. Russell sat at his computer playing a maze-shooting game, all large pixels and rigid motions, narrow corners that made me feel claustrophobic. The room smelled like dirty clothes and the thin, hot smell of warm electronics. We were stereotypical nerds. Everything we talked about and that bonded us together revolved around video games. At school, we anticipated the release of new gaming systems and debated over who had played the most Mario Kart.

A door slammed downstairs, which vibrated the walls and interrupted our incessant daydreaming of woodland forts and fantastical adventures. Russell went downstairs.

"I guess my mom is going to the store," Russell said when he got back.

I remember stepping outside when my father pulled up hours later. My breath was like steam in the starlit night. The air felt cool on my naked arms, but it was a relief to get away from the stuffy and quiet rooms in Russell's house.

There was a light on in the garage. A haze engulfed it and created beams of light that cut through the darkness like swords piercing flesh. I could smell exhaust and felt it hit the back of my throat. I didn't think that the garage could be filled with fumes. I didn't think that the smell I enjoyed could mean death or that the exhaust could be the last memory of a suffocating person. The ride home was filled with excited talk of new

car features and new car smell—the chemical waft of plastic particles from the interior. I leaned my head against the partially-opened window and felt my face go numb in the wind. Everything seemed right, peaceful.

Later that night, right before I went to bed, there was a phone call. My father talked in a hushed voice and when he hung up the phone, he sat down for a moment.

"Russell won't be at school for a while," he said, his eyebrows curving in a way I hadn't seen before, save that time he broke a glass in the kitchen after my mother told him she was leaving.

I stared and let the words "passed away," "garage," and "suicide" roll over me. I thought of the frosty mornings before school, sitting in my grandpa's old truck, watching the white haze of exhaust drift into the misty air. I thought of the clean, bitter smell of the new truck and wondered what her car's exhaust smelled like. •