

A Drive

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I'm back for Spring Break today, so I drove somewhere irrelevant and with my hands at 10 and 2. I almost cried not out of happiness or sadness but because as Holocene played over the AUX with a hint of static I was so suddenly overwhelmed by the idea of my own humanity in the houses and the old school, the flowers in the cemetery and the highway with its cars going 85 despite the pelting rain and, again, where I was going was irrelevant and I don't even know that there was a *where* anyways and I just smiled and eventually got off at some exit and texted my mom some heart emojis.

I drove, and I contemplated. No destination needed.

According to my driver's license, I received my license on February 12th, 2018. That was in 11th grade. My older sister had received hers around the same age, and so did my brother, and now I was the third to drive the car that they had each used before buying things in their own names.

This vehicle was (is) a 2008 Nissan Versa. It's gray; and when it was purchased in 2011 it was used but in great condition. Today, I took it for a drive and decided to notice the crack in the windshield and the cacophony of the overworked engine. The glovebox had sticker residue on it from Mary Grace's early days in social work (she collected her first few school name tags). And then the fabric that lined the armrests was peeling off, and the metal along the exterior driver's side was scraped from an altercation or two.

As I recall it, though, I think this car is in great condition. Conventionally, no, I guess it isn't; I probably wouldn't sell it on Craigslist like that. But on this ride earlier today it got me from A to some ambiguous unsolved X—and the fuel economy is *great*. It does a great job at meeting my two conditions, then, and therefore is in *great condition*.

Before I left the garage, I plugged my phone into the AUX and pumped some hip indie shit for the journey. Then: reel off the driveway. It's sprinkling enough to press on the windshield wipers. Turn off of Nature View Place and onto Buckingham Circle.

I think my neighborhood is very loudly White. Every house in the Polo Fields (in reference to what I understand as croquet with pedigree horses) is a three-sided brick, which is apparently very important because every online listing writes that in bold. People have their garage doors up to expose their shiny trucks and Confederate flags, or to let the smoke of their cigars seep out while they drink Budweisers with their friends after a game of golf.

This is where I grew up, the son of Irish immigrants, where I didn't really know what culture was. I suppose I knew an American materialism battling with a frugal first-generation lifestyle. Beyond that? I only had one close friend who wasn't White, and I only had one teacher who wasn't White; and it wasn't until I got to college that I realized how homogenous it all was. I like to think that the playground in my neighborhood has a bit more melanin nowadays.

I turn right off of Buckingham Circle and then right again onto Post. Eventually I'm on Kelly Mill and am approaching my high school; then halting at a red light; then turning to my left, gazing at the gravel parking lot I spent so much time in. Knowing I wasn't there made me at once jubilant and, more quietly, dejected.

As a canonical story, I was considered popular in high school. My junior year, though, I challenged myself to start eating with people I didn't know whatsoever. I met this guy named Stephen and found that he had moved to Georgia just earlier that year – his family left the Philippines to come here after their house was destroyed by a hurricane. When I first sat with him, he was alone; he said he didn't want to interrupt another group's conversation by sitting with them. Stephen and I didn't talk the most, but it was a good year.

And then senior year came, and I sat with my friends.

Why? I don't know. I think I sat with Stephen because I lost one of my closest friends to mental illness the year before. When Logan was alive, he was always going out of his way to eat with people that were lonelier; and beyond that I suppose I felt in part responsible for his suicide. I remember that one day as I sat with Bella and Liza and Jeremy, laughing and gossiping or whatever, this other guy sat alone (as always) two tables over from us and just started crying.

And we just did nothing as he covered his face and cried and cried for the next 25 minutes. You don't get decisions like that back. They just haunt you and hopefully you learn from them to not be a prick moving forward. I sat with this guy the next day and eventually integrated him into my aforementioned lunch group. His name was also Logan.

The traffic light changes – my foot is back on the gas. If you were looking at a map, you would find that my school and Kelly Mill Road itself are on the more northern edges of Forsyth County where it was still suburban but a bit away from the history of the area. For a moment (my hands still 10 and 2, of course), I thought about how I hadn't been downtown to see the more historic Sawnee Memorial Gardens in a while.

I ought to go see Logan's grave again.

The last time I visited was the day before I came to Vanderbilt; I stopped by to tell him that he was welcome to come with me, I said the Lord's Prayer a couple of times, and then I got back into the Versa and drove off. The cemetery itself was innervated with these small roads that seemed to wind themselves in and out, forcing you to pass a bunch of graves you hadn't bothered to visit. Nonetheless, visiting Logan's felt a bit like visiting them all. They all seemed to overlap, all covered in flowers that waved at you while you left almost as a collective motion.

See you around, I think they said; don't eat too much or too little and be careful in Nashville.

Then they probably talked about how I had grown and how happy they were that I was still going to church. They liked that I was visiting them – all of them, like this huge extended family. It made me wonder about who my neighbors would be once this is all said and done. I hope my graveyard is a meadow.

Eventually I'm leaving a Starbucks drive-thru, and I just turned right and, a quarter-mile later, turned right again; and then I sped up and was on GA-400. My parents (and probably Logan and the other Logan and probably all the flowers from the Memorial Gardens) would kill me if they knew I was driving at 80 miles per hour in what had turned into a downpour. For the most part, it was all for the hell of it, too. I just wanted to get out of Polo and see things. Soon I slowed down to just around 65.

One March evening my senior year of high school, I was driving home from work in Atlanta, and outside of the trajectory of things it was much like the drive today. I was on GA-400 heading north and not south; but the rain was still an absolute onslaught, and I passed the same exits and drove on the same cement.

It was probably around 8 o'clock with similarly hip indie shit (my go-to) playing. The windshield wipers were even at a similar speed of *as-fast-as-they-will-go-because-I-might-just-crash*. Amidst the storm, though, I could still make out landmarks to figure out how close I was getting to Exit 12B – signs and overpasses and things like that.

There was one sign that the state had put up that previous January that always caught my attention.

DEATHS ON GA-400 THIS YEAR: XXX

DRIVE SAFE. ARRIVE ALIVE.

I loved that sign, partly because I loved the premise of bringing some awareness to the hazard to society that is drunk or distracted or otherwise unsafe driving; mostly because it gave me some sense of something I so often chose to ignore. The XXX, of course, is a changing three-digit number. 147 dead on February 2nd, 153 dead on February 3rd, for instance; and from that I could tell myself, *6 died in the past day*. I liked that I knew that. It told me how much to pray. *6 people. 6 Hail Marys*. I would turn off the stereo and think about how fortunate I was to be alive, to have living loved ones. I guess it was my attempt at a meager penance for their tragic deaths.

That March night of my senior year, though, in the midst of the whole cloudburst, I couldn't make out XXX. Squinting I still only saw some distorted LED blur. Look After You (by The Fray, 2005) played in the background a bit longer than usual until I eventually turned it off and just drove and listened to the rain hitting the Versa overhead.

I will never know how many people died between that day in March and the day before. I said thank you for my life, I said thank you for my loved ones; but I will never know how many people's families I needed to pray for that night. I slowed down from 80 to 65 and cars ripped past me. Sometime in that car ride I realized how desperately I wanted to know that all of those speeding fathers and daughters and husbands got home to their children and parents and lovers or their dogs or their fish or whatever was waiting for them.

It was 30 more minutes to get home, and I never turned my music back on, but by the time the engine was off I had told myself that their cars too were off in peace. They made it home; they had to.

In the pouring rain—now in April of my first-year of college—I drove up 400 and sipped on my coffee and thought: *this is what it is to live*. It is to drive through a neighborhood that is seemingly incomparable to the person I am, twisting and contorting in a childhood so singular that I saw Confederate flags more than I saw the Irish flag of my parents' passports or tasted food that was authentically *not* mine. Living is the demise of knowing your friend hung himself because people didn't do enough but knowing that you just don't *want* to do enough even though you *have* and *it wasn't even that bad* so *why can't I sit with the lonely kid at lunch*, having that thought haunt you until you just budge and it's fine just like you knew it would be. It is talking to your friend buried ten feet underneath you, telling him to come to college with you since he never made it there. Maybe even more so, it is realizing that his graveyard is a botanical garden of people that only met in death; but that I would bet are good friends and even a family now, waving me goodbye in the billowing of long-stemmed flowers. And then just as you realize that you'll have a family of fellow corpses with whom you'll share blossoms of your own, you'll realize that you can't keep track of how many of them are around you on the highway just racing by your right and your left. You'll struggle to even know how many prayers to recite because the damn display is broken and all the people that died in the past day didn't get recognized in that way like they were supposed to. Eventually, you will smile.

Living? It is twisting. It is struggling to suffice; it is hurting; and it is realizing. It is growing weary and frustrated, and it is coping with the only explanation possible. Everyone made it home that night.