

## MERCUROCHROME

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In the dark of the kitchen, my cigarette glows. Across the room, the Mr. Coffee gurgles. A snapshot of lightning occasionally lights the room.

I can't sleep through storms.

I might stay awake for hours like this, giving in to my insomnia, only to be rewarded by sunlight and a precise headache. But, alternately, I might hear the faint hiss of a driver's error on the expressway that borders our backyard, followed by the guttural scrape and buckle of metal on metal; the harrowing crash of glass; snapping trees and silenced screams.

Tonight is one of those nights. There is a rough bang followed by aluminum can crumple then a deeper, more ominous sound of a muffler gone loose or off from underbrush. A final thump not unlike a fist hitting a pillow, then nothing but drilling rain.

I put down the nail file and wave my cigarette quickly under the tap, switch off the coffee maker, and hurry upstairs to my husband Gary, who is asleep in bed, unaware. When I shake him he wakes instantly, sensing the electric charge in the air. His eyes search mine for confirmation and I nod. We both dress. I pull the medical bag from the closet. Gary gets the lantern.

We move across the saturated lawn as water seeps around our feet. Rain blasts against the reinforced golf umbrella. As soon as we see the headlamps of the battered car, Gary stops and calls 911 on his cell phone.

A woman is lying ten meters from us, face down, not moving. A man is twisted at a

cruel angle in the driver's seat, his legs obscured by mangled steel, a cowboy hat still affixed to his head.

We go to the woman first. Her eyes are blue and lifeless. She is beautiful. I can smell her perfume through the downpour. I place a blanket on her; we have lots of blankets.

The man is talkative, animated by fresh shock, but we've seen this before. We're only witnessing the final jerks of life. He laughs as blood pours out of him at a tremendous rate.

"My wife," he gasps. "She OK?"

"She's fine," Gary says. "The ambulance is on its way."

"I thought this was the exit," the man sobs.

Gary shakes his head. "Up ahead," he says.

"I guess I *made* an exit," the man says, attempting a joke.

"It's a common mistake," Gary tells him as he gives the man a drink of water from his canteen.

Above us, through the branches, a trucker shouts from the road.

"I called for help when I saw him go off the highway," he calls to us. "Anything I can do?"

We can hardly hear him through the rain.

"No," Gary and I shout back in unison.

"OK, then," the man calls back; we can hear him only faintly. I wonder whether he's relieved that we won't require him to navigate down the steep, brambled slope—that he doesn't have to see what we see. Then we hear him again:

“Are they gonna make it?”

As if we’re doctors; as if we’re qualified to say. Our medical bag is full of the most ineffective of medical supplies: Band-Aids, Q-Tips, aspirin, Mercurochrome.

“Everybody’s gonna make it, I think,” Gary shouts to the trucker, just as the injured driver whispers, “Shit . . .” and expires.

It’s strange here in the night without our neighbors, Amber and Dwayne. But the Falks’ house stands across the yard, dark, empty, and for sale. It’s the only residence besides ours within a half mile of here. The Falks are now in Tucson, where Dwayne is at a new job. I know Amber misses times like this. We talk occasionally. Almost the first thing she will ask when she calls is, “Any turn-outs?” Turn-outs are what we call the people who mistake a pull-off on I-83 for an exit that seems overdue and take a slide down a seventy-five-meter slope into the wild end of our property line.

It’s an unsafe place for a pull-off. It’s deceptive, especially at night and with the actual exit so close. You have fog or rain or sleet or darkness or distraction, and things happen. Why the highway department has not remedied this hazard is a mystery; surely someone is keeping statistics and knows that this is an accident-prone area. We’ve met the same ambulance drivers, the same police, and the same tow-truck operators more than once. Gary and I have shuddered at the waste of it all, but our drafted letters have never been mailed. Sometimes we wonder at the capacity of our own ghoulishness: our need for disfigurement, for tragedy; our addiction to it. Our lives so far have been otherwise free of grief and misfortune. Our childhoods were not ripped apart by divorce or molestation; family members have not been afflicted with incurable diseases. Perhaps we fear the inevitable breach of this shelter.

We view horrific gore from our backyard, but once you're beyond the blood, there is calm in knowing death a little better and knowledge in realizing that it does not care what it looks like. Ultimately, there's also relief in knowing that, at least for now, it's not *you*.

Amber and Dwayne understood this. We found them outside one chilly night when a teenage driver turned out into our yard ten years ago. We found Amber and Dwayne in possession of the medical bag I hold now; with the lantern Gary keeps.

That first time, the sight of blood-soaked grass and the smell of dripping oil and burnt flesh made me retch. Only when authorities arrived did I calm down a little. That's when Amber put a hand on my shoulder and said, in a way that was part apology, part warning, and part something else, "This happens a lot."

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It's happened eight times in ten years—regularly enough that I know the type of weather that causes it and will become sleepless when that weather arrives. I have a crash log in my desk, entries written in longhand in blue ballpoint pen in a cheap drug store notebook. In it, I list names and ages (when I know them), makes and models of vehicles, personal traits of the victims, injuries sustained, causes of death.

Sometimes I look at the log and wonder about the empty lines that I haven't filled yet. I've caught Gary doing the same. Somewhere, someone living now will be entered on the blanks.

On that night years ago when we all met for the first time, Amber, Dwayne, Gary

and I became a team, a united organism. After that, we were not unlike soldiers ordered to the front, emboldened only by each other's company. In numbers, we felt like we could face down anything. We assisted the unfortunate victims however we could, expressing words of comfort, but usually there was little we could do. We rarely had to alert each other. Asleep or not, it was something we were always listening for. When we heard the telltale sounds, we emerged from our homes and walked across the yard, hyperaware, wondering what shape death would or would not take.

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When Gary and I learn that someone has bought the Falks' place, we don't talk about it much, except to hope aloud that they will be nice people, hopefully not too young or too old. Hopefully with kids already grown up or decided against.

On the Saturday the movers arrive, we're having coffee and reading the newspaper on our wraparound upper-level porch. The porch was a major selling point of this house for us. When we first saw it, we imagined ourselves just as we are on this particular day, sitting here with our coffee and newspaper, eye-level with the surrounding tree cover.

*That would be nice,* we said.

The Falks' house has a fully finished basement with a workroom and a built-in Tiki bar. Gary was always envious of that bar, but he would never have traded the porch. Not in a million years.

We give a friendly wave and shout hello when we see the new couple, and they wave back. They seem about our age—early forties. We don't see any kids, and no kids'

stuff is being unloaded.

“Let us know if we can help with anything,” we say.

To Gary I say, “We’ll stop over tonight with cookies or wine.”

“They won’t want to be bothered,” Gary says.

“Believe me,” I say, gesturing to the wilderness that surrounds us, “they’ll want to be bothered.”

We visit that night and meet Rick and Maggie Miller, transplants from New York City. Rick is in the banking software industry, and has taken a job with less plane travel required. Maggie is planning on finding a job teaching ESL to grade-school children. It’s confirmed: no kids.

The bottle of wine gets opened amid a hundred boxes that haven’t been, yet. I admire Maggie’s willingness to let things lie—to admit to herself that she’s done enough for one day and relax. I tell her the things I know about her house. Helpful things. Pleasant things.

Gary and Rick talk golf and cars—passions they share.

We invite them over to our place for a tour and then sit on the porch with some open beers. At some point, we notice as they glance toward the expressway, but all Gary says is, “It’s a little closer than we’d like, but luckily it never gets too loud. Terri actually finds the traffic soothing.”

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Many chats and visits later, Gary and Rick have been to the ranges and the local

baseball games, while Maggie and I have been antiquing and biking the many trails that wind around here. One day Rick is clearing away old twigs in the backyard and finds pieces of vehicles—reflectors, other odd parts.

“Just stuff flung off from the highway?” he asks Gary.

“Maybe. But some cars have actually turned out too soon,” Gary says. “Some cars have been *down* here.”

Another month, and then another. Gary is promoted to Vice President at Barlowe Refrigeration. My online-based jewelry business starts to attract more customers. Now we’re into winter, the first snow of the year. It’s another night when I can’t sleep; this time, I’m thinking of the first snow of the year three years ago, when an SUV flipped over and a man named Marty Sikes was crushed.

I read in the quiet of the kitchen and smoke. Outside, the wind swirls; white, innocent. I turn a page in the supermarket novel I’m reading when I hear a noise like a gate at a horse track flinging open. There are heavy thuds and crashes, followed by silence. I can’t see anything much out of the window—it’s too far back.

Gary is already up and dressing. We get the bag, lantern, and blankets and go outside. The fat flakes whirl around us, landing and melting on our faces. The moon lights up the snow, turning it blue. The Millers’ house is dark and still.

This time, it’s a woman in a pickup truck. She is unconscious, twisted against the roof of the crumpled cab. Blue jeans, Harley T-shirt, a boozy smell. There’s a pack of Parliaments in the snow.

Gary calls 911 while I reach in for a pulse.

From behind, we hear footfalls that startle us, and I wonder if the same sound

scared the Falks on that night ten years ago. The Millers look like ghosts. Blank-faced, they stare at the truck, not comprehending.

Then they look at Gary and me, at our medical bag and lantern. At our composure and preparedness.

Something begins to take hold.

I hand a blanket to Maggie; her fingers close on it tightly, automatically.

I lead her to the body.