

S a m M a r t o n e

We Knew How to Sweat

Around here, the humidity curls your hair, even at night. The poorer girls, the night before prom, they don't even go to a hairdresser. They set up a nice comfortable chair in the front yard of their houses and sleep in the spring heat. Then they show up at the country club in their pretty dresses, traces of foam still around their mouths from where the teeth-whitening strips melted, their hair in perfect little spirals.

Prom just makes me think of backseats. Most of my friends, they didn't even go to prom. They rented a tux but then skipped to the main event with their sweethearts. My girl and me, most nights, there was no place for us to be alone but the back of a car. We'd go down to the lake docks, or to the elementary school parking lot, or sometimes to this unfinished neighborhood behind her own. It was a suburban maze of roads lined with dim streetlights and houses in various stages of completion. Sometimes there was just a single wall standing over a tile floor, with open air on three sides. When we drove through this neighborhood with the windows down, our music bounced around these lone walls. When we didn't play music, there were echoes of things we couldn't hear: animals and insects in the darkness, trains in the distance.

The weirdest parts about the neighborhood, though, were the fully built houses, normal except for that blank emptiness inside them. No furniture, no television glow, no framed photos hanging. You could see it all, all that nothing, through the unshuttered windows.

One night in summer, we were in my dad's car way in the back of that ghost neighborhood parked in the curve of a cul-de-sac. Couldn't leave the car running, couldn't afford the gas. It was so hot, every time we moved we had to peel ourselves from the leather interior, from each other's skin. We were soaked. I kept saying that I wanted her outside, it was too hot in here, but I stopped when I saw something moving out there across the street from us.

I cursed loudly, my pulse feeling like it was trying to escape my wrist, and started pulling my pants up. She reached around in the dark, frantic, for her shirt and panties. I was about to start the car, ready to get the hell out of there, but then I saw it again and relaxed. It was a deer. We looked together and saw, further away, it wasn't just one deer, but a whole herd, dozens. Bucks and does and fawns, emerging from the dark trees at the edge of the neighborhood, just roaming around. They moved together, a huge body of deer, but also pulled apart from each other, rippling, the way river water does when it's disrupted by a downed tree. So many deer and all these half-built houses. We felt like the world had ended and we were the only survivors, but then we remembered her curfew.

We had to dry our hair before I could take her home, so we drove around the empty neighborhood for a while, the air conditioning on full blast.

Her hair was lifted up around her shoulders, flowing behind her like she was a model. It was curlier than I had ever seen it by the time I walked her to the door.

The next fall, people started moving into that neighborhood, the houses suddenly complete, kids playing on the sidewalks, lights going on at night. Everything was so full. 'Course, by then it didn't matter. My dad stopped letting me use his car after I ran it into a tree, and my girl wasn't my girl anymore. She had started a whole 'nother life and there wasn't room for me in it anymore. She said I spent too much time drinking and smoking with my friends. She said I never thought about important things, whatever those were.

Still, I called her sometimes, late at night when I couldn't sleep, and sometimes she answered, and once she came and picked me up. I don't know if it was because she was bored or feeling sorry for me, or if there was a part of her that still liked who we were when we were together. That night, we drove around the neighborhood thinking of what it had been like, knowing that we were the only two people on the planet who had seen that great cloud of deer in the middle of an unfinished housing development on a humid, Alabama night. She told me she was applying to colleges outside the state. She asked me what I was going to do after graduation.

Look, I said, pointing at a house or a mailbox or a street sign, remember when none of this was here?