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## Alcoholism and Oil Deficiencies, or Hydrocarbons: An Essay About Breaking Down

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# ALCOHOLISM AND OIL DEFICIENCIES, OR HYDROCARBONS: AN ESSAY ABOUT BREAKING DOWN

**SCHYLER PERKINS**

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Cadence wakes up. Not always late for work, and not always hung over. But more often than not. Regardless of the circumstances, waking has always been certain. First to the toothbrush. Then to the closet. Then to the car. Then to the factory doors, the wash tank, the fresh metal pipes, scrub brush in hand. Harsh chemicals sting and numb new cuts, factory racket drives away the grogginess. The chemical's scent hardly suppresses the urge to vomit, but that is what cigarette breaks are for. In the birthplace of exhaust pipes, patterns become habits, become rituals.

And the cars. It doesn't happen all at once. Or in the same place. It happens over time, along the way. It builds up in pools, oozing out of dry-rotting hoses. It burns off and evolves into carbon and sulfur dioxide, ash and slag. The irregular and overdue maintenance isn't doing the car any favors. It will go months with the engine light on, with loose tie rods, ground-out brake pads, a weak oil pump. All the factors taking their toll. Adding force and heat. Adding pressures. Pistons warp. The engine warps. New frictions are created. More dry-rot. More heat. More burning.

My weekly routine begins: Wake up. Leave the house. Open the hood. Check the oil. It should be circulating throughout the vehicle, but it is escaping more and more quickly. The dip stick shows the oil marking on the long, thin strip of metal. It will stain up one notch, or two, if I'm lucky. Sometimes the strip will be clean of any marking. The reservoir will be bone dry.

The oil is necessary as a component of the vehicle. It cools. It cleans. It lubricates. But when the reservoir is empty,

the oil doesn't cool down before reentering the engine. The oil keeps circulating, its temperature rising over 200°C, and getting hotter. The hydrocarbons break apart. A plaque precipitates, coating the engine. The amount of oil decreases, the friction increases, the heat rises, and the engine begins picking itself apart, as if its whole being were composed of scabs. Week after week, I will buy a quart of oil, open the hood, and pour it all in. Every last drop. It feels like an accomplishment. It feels like I fixed some large problem. Like the tie rods. Or the brake pads. But adding the oil doesn't fix anything. It only delays the death of the engine, while the rest of the vehicle disintegrates away until my paychecks can fix those problems, too. But for now, keeping the reservoir filled is enough.

Sometimes it feels like my mechanic is trying to be my therapist. He holds a clipboard. He examines the functional parts. Dysfunctions are discovered. Some things are easier to fix than others. I put off either as long as possible. "If you came in a week ago it wouldn't cost so much," is something the mechanic has said to me more than once. But the longer I wait, the longer I can pretend like it's fine, that there isn't so much work to be done.

Cadence collects his weekly paycheck and cashes it. Across the street from the factory is the bank. Next to the bank is the liquor store, and he will walk from one, to the next, to the next. He will buy whatever has the highest alcohol percentage for the lowest price. Sometimes that's Canada House whiskey. Sometimes that's a couple forties of malt liquor. He doesn't like to do the math. He goes with his gut.

He begins his own filling process. He checks the oil; his body has been grinding itself thin for the whole week. He gets home; television on, stereo on, shoes off, phone off. He fills himself. For a while he can ignore his own broken tie rods, his own ground-down brake pads. He has always had a problem with stability and knowing when to stop. Then his reservoir is full. Cadence wakes up.