

*I hate Atlanta's skyline*, I think as I look out from atop the abandoned Presidential Hotel. Spaghetti Junction roars sea-like below while the light from the city clogs the stars from the sky. My eyes trace the jagged, harsh city outline and I hear a whisper of dread speak its way across my insides, while below in the hotel's mantle of cracked tarmac road and interspersed trees, an orange and white light blinks on and on.

Behind me, some of my friends discuss Star Wars while another roams the roof with his camera, taking stills of the rundown architecture and the painted wisdom of the cracked walls. "Everything is a canvas," one verse reads. I hear his shutter release.

I am suspended somewhere between the two: entirely of the moment, entranced by the lights, and yet elsewhere simultaneously. I think of the hundreds of thousands that live and move among city lights, and even more, I think of how every single twinkle is a life just as complex and emotive as mine. The thought dwindles and stifles me with pointlessness. I feel a cocktail of obscured anxiety and sadness settle over me like a thin blanket that does little to shield my fingers and toes from the frigid, biting wind. The orange and white blinks on and on below.

Dread drags me further into myself. I feel as though I am going insane. The veins in my temple pick up their pulse to the anticipatory beat of a dry ceremonial drum. Car lights surge like neurons through synaptic roads, phones ring in office buildings like the cries of the newborns that come in droves from the hospitals, life goes on in its brutal barrage forward and the orange and white light blinks on. I can see all of it. I can feel all of it — life moving on, leaving me

behind to rot like the crumbling building beneath me, like a tin can in dragnet behind a car with “just married” painted on its rear. For a mind set on the future, the present is stuck in the past.

“Justin, do we need to go?” someone asks. My friends are all looking at me, reading my sullen silence and the rapid fire of my vaporized breath as a sign of my mounting anxiety.

“Yes,” I reply, and the orange and white light stops blinking.

As we creep down the decaying stairwell, those interminable flights, I’m reminded of the first time I saw my dad have a panic attack. I was around ten years old, and I was hiking through the woods with he and my grandpa. Dark clouds billowed overhead, and I asked my dad if we could leave; I felt something worse than just rain loomed above us.

“Just a little longer,” I was told. “Just a little longer.”

When the storm broke, there was hardly a pause between the lightning and the thunder. We tried to make our way out of the woods quickly, but we kept having to stop as my double would buckle over in a hysteric flurry of shallow breaths. Seeing my dad so terrified shook me. I was sure that I’d die before I’d make it out of the woods.

We eventually did, but that moment stuck with me.

In the hotel’s lobby, we keep our flashlights focused on the floor as to watch our step for the broken glass and debris that was littered about as well as to not let anyone know that we’re somewhere we shouldn’t be.

Walking away from the hotel, I turn back and look up at the building which looks almost like an apparition in the night with low clouds crusting its upper floors. I pull out my phone and take a picture.

We make it to the road and think we're in the clear, until one of us spots a marked car idling down the road from us.

"Security," one of us says.

"Think he sees us?" another asks, but before anyone can answer, the car begins to move as its lights flash on, orange and white.

We take off running down the road from the car. I have no idea what will happen if I'm caught, and that should scare me. But, for some reason, it doesn't. The lights, now so close behind, forces me entirely into the present, as if the lights, and everything else behind me, no longer exists, and the only thing before me was the tarmac road. In this moment, I don't care whether that night would find me sleeping beneath a headboard or a headstone.

I keep running while behind me the lights blink on and on and on...