

'Six' by Sasha Vucicevic
Second runner-up
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Six

Along the mountain's side there was a stringed, snapped road tied to a nine-to-five. Through seasons, summer and stone, it slept under a blanket of mist; haunted by ghosts of fog. In the grey spirals of six o'clocks, Aiden drove.

The car ride was as usual: she went slow, dazed, as if pretending to wander. Though she could not know anything better than this road; she was sure, if she looked closely, she could trace the grooves of her tyres engraved into the asphalt. Her commute to and from work was perfected, and she was never late. She had been praised for this routine, but to call it a routine would be wrong. It was a certainty, an impulse, a religion. Lately, Aiden hadn't even bothered to turn the radio on. Not since the rain started. Perhaps she had hoped to find some peace in the soft patter of the droplets, like one hopes to find in children's feet or kitten paws. It sounded like static.

The balding tyres rolled downhill towards the stoplight shimmering at the bottom; in the rain, it was almost a mirage. Just beyond, she found her parking space waiting for her, soaking in an ever-growing puddle that threatened to swallow it whole. She waded in and left the engine running for a moment, which turned into ten, and then twenty. This was expected - of course. Eventually, when the windscreen began to fog, she clicked off the engine and stepped out. She felt the puddle sink into her shoes.

Sagged against her headrest, Aiden drove home. Driving uphill, she stole a glance at the darkening horizon. Tied to her road was a forest that snapped at the crumbled edges of bitumen as the hill steepened. If she took a moment to listen, the hushed rumble of waves could be heard from beyond it - it was as if the forest was calling. Between the ripple of branches, she could see the blackened shadow of water that lost itself in the treetops. Wishing she could do the same, she turned her attention back to the road and followed it home. Aiden liked to imagine that her porch light still worked; that it would be waiting for her, yellow and warm and inviting. Her imagination used to like the thought of a partner too; who would have been waiting with dinner ready and something

easy on the television. Which wasn't so much to ask for, especially on a night like this. Like all the nights like this. Like all of the nights that were always like the nights like this.

And maybe they'd have had a dog who'd scratch up all the furniture. And maybe they would have fought about it. Or they wouldn't have. Or one day it would have gone missing, and Aiden would drive this same road to look for it, and it would have been something different...at least. Aiden rounded the corner and gasped, slamming the brakes. She was an age away from hitting the car that was pulled over ahead. It leaned sleepily into the rocky surface of the mountain with a dangerously crushed front. Aiden sat in a quiet bewilderment and stared at it. The road was so tautly wound that the car had blocked off her lane entirely. Makeshift traffic lights sat abandoned next to the wreckage, which she assumed would have told her when it was safe to go. Instead, the orange light blinked stupidly at her. The outside world was purple and silent at six - no engines or headlights to be seen but hers. Still, she sat, foot pressing deeper into the brake. A part of her hoped it was caution, but the truth was that she had forgotten what to do. It was as if someone had jarred her awake while sleepwalking, and she barely remembered her name. Slowly, she accelerated until the wreck was behind her.

The tired fog-lights of her hatchback barely broke the haze of the morning as Aiden fell into her rhythm. There would be no smooth line of ocean on a day like this; the forest, and beyond it, were cloaked in mist. She had the faint feeling she had forgotten something. Her watch was on - the small hand hovering over the six - and she had checked her handbag.

It was the car - it was gone. There was not even an oil spill or shard of glass to have marked it's passing. Aiden slowed to check if she had missed it, or if she had mistaken where it had been. More likely, it had been towed, because that is the way of things. Except this wasn't, somehow. Not for her. Her hand reached for the volume to turn up the radio; it was so loud that her ears hurt.

She got in her car, again.

At six o'clock, again.

After working an hour with no overtime, again.

Pulled onto that same fucking road, again.

With a full fridge in her kitchen and a soft bed at home, again.

With Netflix and Panadol and Instagram, again.

And she forced herself to be grateful, again.

And then, she cried.

Day broke, like it always did. Today, the rain clouds broke too; through the cracks, soft, white light floated between the rain-dark patches of sky. Aiden was late. Six had come and gone without her, and she was in no rush to chase it. People on the radio chattered and laughed and advertised life insurance. Aiden let the car roll downhill. She stopped at the green light at the bottom, staring at her parking spot. She eyed the turn, and then the crossroad in front. The light changed - twice - and Aiden just...looked. As her phone began to scream at her from the floor of the passenger's side, she let her hands find the familiar motion of turning the wheel, and pulled into work. She waited the twenty minutes as usual - because they were hers - before going inside.

By evening, she was back at her car door. The day replayed in her head. Her desk had been clear last night, and her work diligently done and organised. So, how could it have been buried in paper? Piles and piles of paper...not even a sticky note with a big-mouthed smiley face next to abrupt scrawl that said "these need to be in today, thanks!" There was no order, no instructions, and seemingly no end. Mechanically, she got to work: editing, signing, filing, organising - mind-numbing.

Only a section of the way through the mess, chitters and chimes of 'see you tomorrow' echoed through the office. When she was done, there was only quiet.

As always - as was *tradition* - she placed the perfectly revised files on her manager's desk in orderly, tidy sections. Aiden took care to scrawl a smiley face on a post-it and stuck it neatly onto the computer monitor. Attentively, she aligned each pile once more.

She opened the drawer, found the green lighter they used for birthday cakes, and set the whole thing on fire.

Snapped somewhere along a string road, there was a car pulled over with the keys swaying at the ignition. Softly, strained headlights dusted over the trees as the brush turned from green to black. Aiden's car door hung open. On another day, she might have thought about how the glitter of rain would seep into the electrics. On another day, she might be thinking about her open wallet on the passenger's seat or returning her sister's call. Instead, she thought about none of it on purpose. As droplets began to soak into her hair, Aiden slipped off her shoes and sat them where the soil met the road. Slowly, she rolled her feet into the pebbles and broken asphalt, listening to the distant hum of the sea. In a way, she must have looked like a person about to walk into the ocean. But she wasn't. She would be back. It would be a different road to the one she left behind; or it would be a delight to find it just the same. Barefoot, the woman stepped into the dirt. Fallen leaves and seeds made way for her as she melted into the trees. See, going to the ocean is to ask and know it's answer; there are no questions left in waves, and no air for talk. Go to the forest - the wild is where you go to ask for more.