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## Flat Black Tires

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**FLAT BLACK TIRES** ALLIE GRUNER

Thirty-five miles to Portland, it's already 5:30. The rotating thud under the trunk resonates in my sternum as the Amoco beams its commercial greeting.

My wife's tense voice picks up after the engine dies. It shakes and falls at the end of each sentence like the crackle of a far away radio station. Her mother cooked a beautiful roast and we don't have the decency to show up on time. I close the door in silence because that's all there is to say. I know she doesn't give a damn about her mother's dry pot roast.

There's a line at the air pump. The teenage girls ahead of me are struggling with the nozzle on their black colored Cutlass with peeling paint. Instead of filling the tire, the air is obstinate, blowing their matching geometric haircuts into mops across pale foreheads. Sighing, I kneel down to help the purple mop hold the corroded tube to the tire next to our station wagon with too much trunk space.

My wife waits, enveloped in the air-conditioned leather with her arms wrapped around the flat stomach I used to sleep against. She sits staring straight ahead. Her extraordinary mind filled with soft skin and talc, too crowded for me.

*"They said the results were conclusive."*

*"Yeah, so are storybook endings... and death."*

Looking at the hunched figure next to me squatting in the stench of gasoline, I notice her tattered clothes and my shoulder begins to itch.

"Where're you headed," I ask, glancing at the side of her thin face. I can barely hear her over the wheeze of the nozzle as it reluctantly submits to my steady hand.

"San Francisco," she answers, still studying the wheel bed. My eyes join hers and we

stare intently as the tire expands with air. The other girl lights a cigarette. Smoke curls around her scarred cheekbones and underneath eyes that flit around like a humming bird, resting on nothing.

With bodies no more than sixteen, their faces say something different, like bright wrapping paper crumpled and discarded on the floor.

*"What about life?"*

*"I never wanted them anyway. Never wanted the trouble."*

Their tire is filled and I pull the hose over to the station wagon. Before I kneel, I notice my wife watching intently as the girls get into their car. The one with the cigarette stares straight ahead, inhaling deeply. I look over to the driver's side. The purple mop gives me a slight wave of thanks out the window before putting the Cutlass in gear and edging out into traffic.

I can see her now, gripping that wheel with every chewed fingernail.

