

The Vandal

Young Marjorie Claremont, who until that evening had never caused anyone a moment's trouble, keyed one-hundred and twenty-six and a half cars and pickups parked bumper to bumper down the hillside from the amphitheater. In the last car at the corner sat a man who had felt ill during the concert and, thinking he might be having a heart attack, had left in case he needed to drive himself to the hospital. As he wondered whether he was simply suffering from severe gas pangs and agoraphobia, he saw the girl in his rearview mirror. She was walking downhill and scraping the side of a car with a silver key. He thought she was perhaps getting back at a boyfriend, but then she keyed the next car, and then the one immediately behind him, and it was then, realizing her mindless destruction would soon reach him, that he stepped from his car.

Marjorie didn't know the last car was occupied until the man stepped from it. She halted, the key making it to the seam of his fuel door cover, but no further, the bow hot between her fingers. She and the man eyed each other. He was thin, pale. She was thin, paler. She wanted to bolt to the intersection beyond him, but his open door nearly touched the second lane of cars stack-parked in a cascade down from the amphitheater. She scrambled over the bumpers where two cars met, but the man caught her by a belt loop and pulled her back. He grabbed her wrist next and swung her arm around to her back, pushing her so forcefully up the hill that she did not resist. Marjorie didn't know if the bloom of heat she felt within her was from being caught or if it was merely the pure charge of being bad.

As he led her uphill, the man watched the silver scrape wind from car to car. He was so shocked by her act of destruction that he forgot all about his chest pains. "What you do this for?" he said, but she wouldn't satisfy him with an answer.

She didn't know why she'd keyed the cars. It started as a simple self-dare, seeing all that waxed and polished paint sluicing down the gentle curve of the hillside. Marjorie had held out her house key and half-closed

her eyes, seeing how close she could come without causing damage. It wasn't completely out of character: she sometimes bicycled with her eyes closed for long seconds at a time, particularly when crossing intersections; she held her breath in class and tried to run out of air without anyone else noticing; and she'd started waiting to use the bathroom at home until she reached a titillating desperation. But there'd never been any consequence to these private acts of daring, just a private little thrill.

While walking home from a friend's house that evening, Marjorie had taken the longer way home, past the amphitheater. She'd been to shows there plenty of times, but without a ticket it always felt like a place she didn't know at all. She'd taken out her house key and closed her eyes. There'd been that stumble, if one could call it that, and once she'd made her first mark, she continued, reaching the virgin steel of one car, then another and another, each surface adding a new entry in her library of sounds and sensations. Some cars made little curlicues of carnauba, others spat paint, a few even gave way beneath the tip of her key to the surprise of rust-eaten hollows. If she'd had a second key, she'd have done the cars parked on her left side, too. She could have reached that far, easily.

The man's hand made something in her fingers crack. Marjorie cried out and realized she could run faster uphill than the man could push her. He yanked her back but she ran again. She could hear music from the amphitheater now, drums and a baseline and a general diaphanous applause mixed with what sounded like jeering. She managed to twist free from the man and kept on running, there alongside her handiwork, all the way to where she'd begun, just below the security guards at the entrance gate. Breathless, she pointed to the man chasing after her, but she didn't stop running until she was laughing and truly free, lost in the neighborhood. She flexed her hand and was fine. Of all nights, she hadn't expected this evening to be the one when she discovered she possessed the adult illicitness with which she'd only flirted. Sixteen and a half years of goodness, gone at once. She arrived at home feeling rich, but had to wait for her mother to get off work to let her in; a third of her key had worn away and couldn't reach the deepest pins in the lock. She expected the police to come that night, but of course none came, that night or ever.

For years afterwards, whenever she saw a keyed car on the streets, she wondered if it was one she'd done, even long after any of those cars could

possibly be still on the road. The first car Marjorie went on to personally own—and every car she owned after that one—she keyed herself, the day she drove it home. The first time someone saw the scratches on her car she was given more sympathy than such a thin groove deserved to elicit. She said nothing; such self-harm was unimaginable to others. From then on, she began to wonder if keying all one-hundred and twenty-six and a half cars—apart from that last half one—was, in its own peculiar way, the first act of kindness she'd given to the world.