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Sarah Burgess College of DuPage

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Through the Broken Looking Glass

by Sarah Burgess

(English 1101)

often wonder if people would live their lives differently if they could see into the future and know what fate has in store for them. I wish I could have peered into a looking glass before that day, and stopped myself from ever getting into the car.

I arrived in Germany during the harsh, long winter almost three years ago. I had left my home in Chicago to work as a live-in nanny for a family near Münich, in the southern tip of the country. The culture shock of new and unknown surroundings hit me like a surfer confronting the largest wave of his life. I slowly adapted to living with my new host family, yet the loneliness of being a foreigner soon sent me into a deep depression. Four agonizing months passed before a shining light entered my horizon; my best friend was coming all the way from Wisconsin to visit me. I hoped that her arrival in my small German town would give me the renewed strength and happiness I so desperately needed.

I saw her familiar face squished between passengers fighting their way through a zoo of people in the arrival terminal of Münich International Airport. A flitter of butterfly wings tickled my stomach as I stood there in silent anticipation of our reunion. Her lips formed a well-known smile as she made her way down the rolling walkway, and the dam broke between my eyelids as tears flooded my face. We giggled with excitement and pulled each other into a crushing embrace.

Making our way to the airport parking lot, we started searching through rows of cars for the beat up blue station wagon I had borrowed from my host family. It was so hot my clothes were glued to my skin with sweat. Relief came from the shouting of my boyfriend far ahead of us; he had found the car amongst a row of shiny BMW cruisers. We caught up with him and I unlocked the doors. Laughing like schoolchildren, they fought over who would sit in the front seat. My boyfriend swung his shoulders past her like a wrecking ball and crashed into the seat beside me. She released her hands from the door and gave a defeated sigh as she dropped like a stone onto the backseat.

The noise from their conversation irritated my ears like buzzing bees. I became annoyed that my boyfriend, whom I had only been dating for a month, began to flirt with my friend. They were passing McDonald's fries back and forth to each other while playfully trying to guess the name of the song blaring from the radio. Amidst their giggling and cracked singing voices, I sensed my phone vibrating against my leg. A second later I was digging through the jumbled contents of my purse with my right hand, keeping the other steady upon the wheel.

A piercing scream broke my concentration as my head cracked upwards. Large white posts rammed with charging force against the car. The crushing of metal and wood scratched my eardrums like nails across a blackboard. My heart took a roller coaster dive and I slammed my foot against the brake pedal. A blurred vision of trees rushed past the windows before everything fell into darkness and became deathly silent.

A distant voice pulled me away from the carousel turning in my mind. I felt slow movement to my right and heard groans of pain from the back seat. I peeled my fingers from the steering wheel and rubbed furiously like an eraser against my eyes. Short, wheezing breaths pushed through my lungs. The smell of burnt rubber filled my nostrils as the ringing of bells began to beat within my eardrums.

Something was knocking against the window on my left. I turned and briefly saw the distorted face of a stranger before my door flew open. Hands pushed against my shoulders and forced

me out of the car. My friend was shaken and confused, telling me over and over again that she hated me as my boyfriend pried her door open. I didn't recognize the stranger, who was frantically dialing numbers on a cellphone. I leaned against the titled car and slowly adjusted to my surroundings.

There I was, standing on a grassy ditch alongside a long country road, sighing as cold wind whipped strands of hair against my face and scraped my eyes. I wanted so desperately to cry but the tears weren't falling. It was then that I remembered what had caused all of this, and I found my cell phone crushed at the bottom of the car floor. A sad smile reached my lips as I watched a picture of us from only a few hours before flickering on and off upon the cracked plastic.

It was on this day that my life changed. My girlfriend, whose face was plastered with a smirk as she stood in shock beside me, ended up in the hospital. It was Easter weekend and we spent it in a cold waiting room, hoping she hadn't suffered permanent damage to her spinal cord. Shortly after she left, I lost my job as a nanny for my host family because I couldn't pay for the damage to the car. I ended up moving in with my boyfriend and spending the next two years of my life struggling to find a stable job.

Sometimes, when I sit back and look at everything that has happened since the crash, I'm reminded of standing in shock against the car. I can faintly smell the burnt rubber in my nostrils, and still feel the contents of my stomach swirling as if being flushed down a toilet. The ringing still plays inside my brain as I remember the shock of impact. I often wonder where I would be now if I had never searched for my phone; maybe I would have left Germany sooner, or still be there today. The only thing I know for certain is that I'll never forget the fateful drive that changed it all.