

---

FICTION | FALL 2024

## There's a Special on Car Washes

By Rory O'Sullivan

An empty stretch of highway on a dark winter's night. Nothing but the sweep of headlights on blacktop, the hypnotic rhythm of passing telephone poles. He checks the dashboard clock for the third time in fifteen minutes. Alone in the car, bathed in the soft blue light of the dashboard instruments, he sighs. His body is stiff with impatience.

He got the call from the hospital two hours ago. His mother was sick. Really sick this time. The voice on the other end of the phone was young, tentative, trying to convey urgency without committing too much. You'd better come soon. Tonight. She might not make it.

Two hours ago he'd hauled himself out of bed, mumbled something to his wife, pulled jeans and a cable-knit sweater over his t-shirt and boxers, and made his way downstairs. The fuzz of interrupted sleep had passed by the time he'd found his way into snow boots and outside, where the frigid air jolted him into reality. He'd sat in the driver's seat as the car idled, the defroster desperately funneling warm air up the windshield, scrambling to beat back the elements.

Now he is two hours down the road, with two hours left to get to the city. He's shed his coat and gloves as the car has become uncomfortably warm. He stares at the lonely road, lulled by the inky blackness. She's been sick before, a few times this year already. The nursing home has a low threshold for calling the ambulance. The first time it happened he'd done a similar hustle down the highway to the city, begged off work for a few days. Then gotten to her bedside and found himself fairly useless, trapped in a hospital purgatory where nothing happened until everything happened, where no one seemed to know exactly what was going on or who was in charge. Where you tried to catch the doctors who whisked in and out at odd hours like ghosts. After that, the late night calls had become sort of routine. He recognized now that he was being notified as a formality.

This time seems to be different.

He feels guilty. What adult child doesn't while away their days with guilt sitting in the pit of their stomach? That's the essence of having an elderly parent, he muses. Guilty that he doesn't live closer. Guilty that he doesn't visit more. Guilty that his mind wanders to the weekend plans that he has to reorganize. He was supposed to clear the gutters today. They aren't going to clear themselves.

The lantern glow of an off-ramp gas station sign appears over the crest of a hill. He eyes the fuel gauge. The amber flash of his indicator light floods the highway shoulder, alerting no one as the car slips off the main road. The gas station is nearly empty too. Just a lone, skinny young man in a red tunic looking bored behind the plate glass window of the shop. He gives the young man a curt nod as he pulls up to the pump. A weary acknowledgement that it's not fair either of them are out in the world at this remarkable hour.

He is just about to turn the engine off when the car's electronic system springs to life. It takes him a moment to realize it's a phone call coming in, streaming through the car speakers. He recognizes the voice as the same young woman who called him from the hospital earlier. Working so hard to strike the right note of professional compassion.

"Is that Mr. Jordan?"

“Yes.”

“The son of Ethel Jordan?”

“Yes.”

“We spoke earlier?”

“Yes.” Irritation flashes through him. His eyes settle on the young man in the gas station window, who has busied himself stacking lottery tickets.

“I’m sorry to have to inform you – I’m sorry to have to tell you, sir, your mother has, uh, passed away.”

“Oh.” The car fills with the hiss of static.

“Sir?”

“Yes. Yes, I’m here.”

More static.

“Um, ok. Well, she was peaceful... She wasn’t conscious when she passed, sir. She didn’t suffer at the end.”

He swallows hard.

“So, uh... You’re on your way, right?”

Is he? “Right. Right, uh... I’m about two hours away.” Suctioning back down onto numbers. Practical details. Like gravity boots.

“Ok. If you make your way to the nursing station on Four East, they’ll be able to direct you.”

“Ok. Four East.”

“Any questions for me, sir?”

Does he have questions? Is he supposed to? “No, thank you. Thank you very much.”

The static resorbs into the air. He stares at the dashboard in silence for a long minute, then steps out of the car and pops the gas tank. He stands there in the cold, watching his breath curl skyward, as the pump nozzle pulses in his hand and fills the car. Then he makes his way to the station door. A bell jingles. The young man barely looks up as he enters.

“Number six?”

“Yep. Yes. Thanks.”

“Anything else? Car wash?”

“No, thank you.”

“There’s a special on car washes. Buy nine get the tenth free.”

“No thank you.”

The young man shrugs, unsurprised. The credit card machine struggles and struggles to find a signal. Finally it disgorges a receipt that he folds and tucks into his pocket.

Back out into the cold. The faintest lightening evident in the sky now, the faintest tinge of murky blue. He’ll reach the city just as the traffic is picking up. He hates driving in the city.

The engine growls to life and he points the car back toward the highway. He tips the “on” button for the radio, and gets a burst of chatter from an early-morning talk show. Flurries and gusty winds, high above seasonal. An accident on the 401, left lane blocked. Three shot and killed in Mississauga. The Leafs barely hanging on to their play-off spot. Dissatisfied, he turns the radio off. Listens to the thrum of the engine, the bite of tires on asphalt, the wind whipping by.

His headlights sweep the empty blacktop.

\*\*\*

She sets the phone receiver back down in its cradle, and shivers a little. At four A.M., when the adrenaline of the day and the night wears off, there's a predictable chill that's impossible to avoid. She had been wearing her old hooded sweatshirt over her shoulders like a shawl. Now she slips her arms in and zips it all the way up to her chin over her ill-fitting hospital scrubs.

She's been two months in this job, and every night on call is a night of firsts. Tonight it's her first time being in the room when a person dies. Her first time officially pronouncing a death. Her first time calling The Family.

She steps out into the hospital hallway, which is lit up like it's four in the afternoon. Her pockets are stuffed with scraps of paper, scrawled to-do lists, half-recorded phone messages. She rifles through them to try and find some loose change. She veers into the room with the vending machine and plugs a couple of coins into the slot. She watches in dismay as the mechanism whirs but fails to release any soda. She gives the machine a thump, then another. She is defeated.

She lopez back into the hallway, past a large plate glass window. Above the outline of the adjacent buildings she can see the first signs of lightening in the sky. The faintest tinge of murky blue. She catches the half-hearted outline of her partial reflection in the glass, messy hair sticking out of a loose bun. A porter shuffles by, and they trade a quick polite glance. She considers asking him about the vending machine, but the moment has passed and he has disappeared around the corner.

In the empty hallway, the silence is suddenly broken by the high-pitched whine of her pager. It's a digitized version of the theme from "Hawaii 5-0." The only alarm setting that doesn't set her teeth on edge like nails on a chalkboard.

She fumbles through the pager's tiny buttons, finds the callback number, and enters it quickly on her phone. She's on hold now, and she props herself against the window pane. It feels ice cold against the back of her head.

A disembodied voice from the ER. "Got another one for you."

"Ok."

"Bed C-14. Eighty-two year old male. Weak and dizzy. Nothing in the labs, CT head is pending."

"Ok. Any family?"

"Sent in from the Manor. Haven't seen anyone yet."

"Ok. C-14."

"Yep."

"Ok."

The window pane cold against the back of her head. The chill of fatigue in her bones. Four more hours and she will sprint from the hospital, across the exposed walkway without her coat, and wind her way up to the top of the parking garage. She'll be leaving just as the traffic is picking up. She hates driving in the city.

---

**Rory O'Sullivan is a family doctor in Toronto, Canada, and an assistant professor of family medicine at the University of Toronto. His written work has previously been published in Intima, Pulse, Canadian Family Physician, and The COVID Journals anthology from University of Alberta Press. He is a past recipient of the CFPC Mimi Divinsky Award for History and Narrative in Family Medicine. He has worked in a range of clinical settings across four Canadian provinces and collected amazing stories along the way. Read more of his work at [roryosullivan.ca](http://roryosullivan.ca) or @TheCountryMD**

---