

# Before the Horn

*A Personal Essay*

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The parking lot is empty except for my car and the dark. I sit with the engine off, seat reclined just enough to see the sky through the windshield. No moon tonight, just a wash of stars above the warehouse roof and the faint orange glow of a streetlight dying at the far end of the lot. My shift starts in fifteen minutes. I'm not ready. I'm never ready.

I pull out my journal — a beat-up composition notebook I keep in the center console, pages swollen from being opened and closed a thousand times. I click a pen and write whatever comes. Sometimes it's a sentence. Sometimes it's a paragraph that spills across two pages before I realize I've been holding my breath. Tonight I write about football. About the version of myself that was fast enough, strong enough, talented enough to play pro indoor. The version that never pushed hard enough to find out what the next level looked like. I write about what ifs. I write about the weight of knowing you had something and let it sit.

Regret doesn't haunt me. It hunts me. It's not a ghost drifting through my thoughts — it's something with teeth, something that shows up in the quiet moments when I'm alone with nothing to distract me. Like right now, in a parking lot, staring at the sky, fifteen minutes before I have to go stand on cracked concrete for the next eight hours.

The train comes right on time. It always does. The horn cuts through the lot — two long blasts, one short — and I feel it in my chest before I hear it fade down the tracks behind the building. Five minutes. I close the notebook, drop it back in the console, and pull myself out of the car.

The warehouse door is heavy. Industrial. The kind of door that doesn't care if you're coming or going. I step inside and the sensor lights flicker on above me, section by section, like the building is waking up because it has to, not because it

wants to. The darkness peels back in rows, revealing what I already know is there: rusted racks stretching to the ceiling, worn-out boxes sagging on pallets, a reach truck from another decade parked in the corner plugged into a charger held together by screws that gave up a long time ago.

*Another fucking day.*

The thought arrives before I can stop it. It's not anger anymore. It used to be. Now it's just reflex, like blinking. A sigh that starts somewhere below my ribs and leaves through my nose, which is already clogging. The dust hits me the second I cross the threshold — thick, stale air that hasn't moved since the last shift ended. My nose shuts down within thirty seconds. My eyes water. I blink it away and keep walking.

Then the speakers come alive. They hang from the ceiling beams, wired up like an afterthought, and whatever playlist someone loaded months ago is still cycling. Tonight it's NSYNC. "Bye Bye Bye" bleeding through the dust at a volume that's just loud enough to be annoying and not loud enough to drown out the hum of the fluorescents. Nobody reacts. Nobody has reacted to the music in years. It's just part of the atmosphere now, like the concrete, like the rust, like the smell.

I have a bachelor's degree. Film studies and creative writing. I walked across a stage in a cap and gown and somebody handed me a piece of paper that said I was qualified to tell stories. That was the plan. That was the version of my life I pitched to myself at twenty-one — scripts, essays, maybe a film, maybe a writing career that meant something. I don't know when that plan dissolved. It didn't explode. It just evaporated, slowly, the way ambition does when rent is due and a warehouse is hiring and the job is only supposed to be temporary.

Temporary has a way of becoming permanent when you're not paying attention. One year becomes three. Three becomes most of your working life. You stop telling people what your degree is in because the follow-up question is always the same — a look, a pause, and then something polite that really means: so why are you here?

I ask myself that too. Not out loud. In the car, in the parking lot, in the minutes before the horn.

But here's the thing about that notebook in my console: it doesn't ask me that question. It doesn't ask me anything. It just takes whatever I give it. On the nights when the regret is loud — the football, the degree, the decisions I can't undo — I open it and write until my hand cramps or the train comes, whichever happens first. And something shifts. Not everything. Not enough to call it healing or some breakthrough. But enough.

Writing became my psychologist without the pills and the meaningless appointments. I tried those. I sat in chairs and answered questions and drove home feeling the same. But the journal doesn't need me to explain myself on someone else's terms. It's my freedom. My way to explain without opinions. No one is grading it, diagnosing it, or telling me what it means. It's just mine.

And somewhere in the middle of filling those pages — somewhere between the self-pity and the NSYNC and the rusted screws — I started to realize that this thing I was doing in the dark, in a parking lot, before a shift I hated, was the same thing I went to school for. I was writing. Not for a professor. Not for a grade. For my life.

The horn blows. I close the notebook. I walk through the heavy door and let the sensor lights reveal the same warehouse they revealed yesterday. The dust, the racks, the speakers, the concrete. Nothing in here has changed. But I have a notebook full of proof that I'm not done. That the version of me who wanted to tell stories didn't evaporate. He was just sitting in a parking lot, waiting for me to hand him a pen.

I'm still in the warehouse. But I'm writing my way out.