

1st Place (2023): Kate Shaw, Out of Time

His eyes blur. His focus shifts as raindrops hit the glass. Dark shadows stretch out long and lean, making the world seem bigger. Or smaller. He reaches for the coffee cup, discarded but not empty, the hard black shell still faintly warm. His jacket rides up, exposing his wrist to the cold before he manages to shuffle it back into position.

The rain is falling in earnest now, wind peppering it across the windshield. It's not a downpour, just enough to sit on the ground, to catch in the beam of the headlights. The road ahead glistens, stretches out further than the beams. Tyres swish monotonously.

The road's been empty for miles. For days.

Or maybe it's full.

Full of drifters.

Spaced out.

Moving in time.

Never falling behind, never catching up.

Leaving nothing but tyre tread.

The rain's sheeting the road now. Everything slows. The high beams hit a clump of trees. He's got nowhere to be. Not tonight, at least. He turns the wheel, angles in, slinks around just out of sight. Cabbage trees mark the rest area but there's enough scrubby bush to provide cover, enough gravelled space to stretch road-wary legs, walk out some kinks.

He shrugs against the collar of his jacket. Trying to retain the car warmth against the night. He's been bouncing across the country, Northland to Wellington and everywhere in between, never where it matters. None of it sits right. He can't reach it, but he can't turn back. Still, he's gotta hit a town before the weather packs up in earnest. He breathes in the air. Rain, asphalt, dirt, exhaust. No wind now, just fat drops splattering across the streak of the car beams, leaving puddles in the gravel. Temperature's dropping though. In a couple of days, it'll be too cold to bed down in the car. A week, maybe, if he's lucky. For now, a few hours' sleep is the best he can do.

The rain's stopped. You can usually outrun the weather on the road, at least for a while. He flicks the radio on, drowns out the silence. There's coverage at least 60 per cent of the time. Even static beats the quiet sometimes. The next town's gonna be the one he sticks to, at least for a couple of days. He needs to get out. Be with people. With other drifters, fading in and out, or with real people – those who stay, who build, who belong.

The dice roll.

Snake eyes.

A yellowing Tip-Top sign. Dusty footpaths even though he's driven through rain. He's only been driving a few days. Could keep on. Should keep on. Maybe down the road, a piece, he'll get lucky, find a nicer town. A teashop serving ham sandwiches thick with butter. Ladies in aprons quick to smile but happy to leave him be. A place to rest, recharge just for a while. Yeah, and maybe there'll be a five-star hotel with room service and a bar that gives you free beer at happy hour too. Hasn't happened yet.

He pulls into the car park. Va'ncy light flickering. Another no-tell motel. It could be anywhere. The few cars scattered around look like they've been run hard.

Last stop on the drifters' tour.

Everybody out, nowhere to be.

He tosses two hundred to the woman on the desk. It'll buy him a few days. She smiles and shakes her head at another soul lost to the road. He smiles back. Tries to find the spark to show her he's not there yet. He's still got somewhere to be. He's not sure if he succeeds.

He sleeps ten hours straight. Collapsed, bone-weary, out cold on top of the beige-patterned cover hiding even beige sheets. Dead-tired nights beat the nights when his mind stays active. Nights spent tossing and turning on what-ifs. Ideas missed, chances not taken—or worse yet, chances taken that didn't pan out. Most nights have him backtracking and second-guessing. Still, he'd even take those nights if they held the dreams at bay. Dream-nights are the worst. Dry breezes, warm smiles. Ice cream on still days, laughter and sorrow mingled, comforting and comfortable. The dreams leave him cold, desolate, clinging to fading images, struggling for breath like the gasps of a dying man. He sighs, long, drawn out. He crashed out around seven last night, so the light of dawn is hardly hinted at through the gaping curtains. He feels like he's still on the road.

Monotonous, monochrome.

Too much silence, too much grey.

He stares unseeing at another motel ceiling. He doesn't need to look to know the paint's peeling, damp spots spreading toward the wall. He sees green eyes and a sea of blonde hair, freckles scattered across a sunburnt nose. Bare feet dug into the sand.

Breath stuttering, he screws his eyes closed. He hates the moment between waking and sleep. Inattention lets too much through. He flicks the switch that turns the room from sepia to beige, swings his jean-clad legs out of bed, stockinged feet hitting the cold carpet. How does it work when you wake up more tired than before? He plunders his duffel, pulls out a change of clothes. Shower first. Then he can review, reflect, renege.

Steam from the bathroom pillows into the room as the first rays of light filter through the still-uncovered window. Clean and dry. At least cleansed of road-dust if nothing else. He flicks on the half-filled jug. Turns the white mug upright and picks up the Bell teabag, its packet limp. His eyes slide to the chairback, drawn to the notebook peeking out of his jacket pocket. Its well-worn cover shields well-worn pages. Not tatty, just over-thumbed. Her picture creased and cracked, tucked into the first page.

It took her slowly at first, like a page tingeing brown on the edges, subtle enough that they didn't notice. Until they did. It was the movements that he lost first. The little touches they'd once shared. She'd once walked close, knocking her shoulders into his chest, or brushing her hands across his knuckles. He mourned their loss in silence, his smile at her jokes pulling just a fraction tighter, his embrace held just a moment longer. She knew it too, but she'd let him cover for her as long as she could. Their days went next. Slipping off the page like they'd never been. Colours erased from her palette, leaving the slate clean and bare. He'd started running then. Dragging her into new memories, determined to keep ahead of the slide. But she'd slowed. Tugging him back, making him live gentle and sure, making their memories deep and true.

Making new dreams, she'd said.

He knew it was wrong even then.

But he'd stayed.

He'd stayed long past her forgetting the good times, long past her forgetting him, forgetting them. He'd stayed until the pain in his eyes brought her to tears. The world was tipping, and they were standing on slippery floors with nothing to hold on to.

So, he'd let her go.

Left her safe.

Left her alone in her new life. Unbridled. Free.

He'd run.

He'd searched alone through his memories, ticking off the changes he'd noticed in her, in them. Changes that he'd discarded as natural, as the ebb and flow of a relationship. He'd searched, begged, bargained, hellbent on finding a way to undo what was done. A way to go back. A way to gather up the shards of their life left shattered along the highways and move forward. His memories never able to rewrite time.

He hadn't looked back until it was too late.

He should never have left.

He should have been someone else to her. Been whoever she needed him to be. Been whoever would keep her close. It was raining then, too, he remembered.

He opens the notebook as if this time it'll show him answers. As if this time it'll show him salvation. He thumbs it again, almost cover to cover. It's hard to keep moving if you've got nowhere to go.

Hard to keep running.

Harder still to stay put.

Maybe nowhere's direction enough.

Sometimes people crowd out the silence, and he can't hear her story. He both craves and hates those times. It's selfish. It's survival.

He closes the book. His hands clench around its cover, creasing it in a familiar bend. He lets out a sigh. A strangled exhale held till his lungs burn.

He knows it's time.

Knows time's running out.

Knows she's already timeless, but he needs to see it through.

He loosens his grasp, straightens the bent, twisted book, and flips to the back page. The page he's ignored. The page he can't ignore. SUNSET DEMENTIA CARE. Visiting hours 9 – 3.

Time's up.

About Kate

