

HOLD THE LIGHT

a flash

He is still wrestling the spare out of the well when he hears the first lug nut ring into the hubcap behind him.

He looks. The boy is already down at the wheel with the iron, breaking the nuts loose across and across, the right order, the order the man taught him on a Saturday so far back he can't place which Saturday.

"You want me to —"

"I got it. Just hold the light up a little. On the studs."

So the man holds the light.

He has, by his own count, taught the boy everything a tire asks of you. Crack the nuts before you jack it, so the wheel can't spin. Lift only till the rubber clears, no higher. Seat the spare with your knee and start every nut by hand, never the iron first, because a crossed thread on a dark road is how a man ends up walking. He taught all of it twice. He taught it the way you teach a thing you want to outlive you.

The boy does it now without being told. Faster than the man does it. He has the easy hands of someone who has never once doubted the wheel would come off, because in his whole life it

always has.

"Cross-pattern," the man says, and hates himself a little, because the boy is already going across.

"Yeah, Dad."

In the morning there is a bus, and after the bus a base, and after the base a part of the world the man has only seen on the news with the sound turned off. They have not talked about it past the logistics. There is the bus, and there is the tire, and only one of them is a thing a father can do anything about.

The boy lowers the jack. The car settles onto the new wheel like it had never ridden on anything else. He goes around the nuts one more time — snug, then a quarter past snug — and stands, and wipes his hands down his jeans. Four minutes, start to finish.

The man is still holding the light.

He keeps it there, aimed at a wheel that doesn't need it anymore, because the light was the last job on the car that was his, and he is not ready yet to click it off.

The boy lets him hold it.

He stands next to his father in the dark, and the two of them look at a tire that is fine, that is good, that will carry him all the

way to the bus.

"Good," the man says.

"Good," says the boy.

And the man thumbs the light off, and the road goes black, and they get in.