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## Southern Dust

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## Southern Dust

### **Author Bio**

Chris Chick is a Religious Studies major with a Writing minor. He is a junior, and serves as the Recorder for Sigma Alpha Epsilon, in addition to playing Offensive Line for the Bullets.

## Southern Dust

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I-85 runs from somewhere up by Richmond, through most of the southeast, and ends out in Montgomery. It's one of those highways that's somehow always crowded but seems to grow more desolate after you leave each successive city; the population follows canyon curves, with stretches that feel like you're somewhere out in Who-Knows rather than being, as you are, never more than 100 miles from a city. In spite of being a major thoroughfare for these southeastern cities, it still finds a way to be dangerously sharp in some of its curves, especially when it rains, and raining it definitely was when I drove home. Forrest Gump wouldn't have had the words to describe this kind of storm, I don't think. Still, it seemed as though we'd all collectively decided that stopping was for chumps.

I noticed her sometime around the I-81 and Rt. 77 interchange, following right on my ass. I brake checked her a couple of times before seeing that it was just some girl who was clearly a little too nervous in the coming rain. Her rationale, I assume, was to stick onto the back of a truck much bigger than her little coupe in the hope that it'd guide her through the traffic (and with the way I drive, I most certainly did). Maybe she saw the college stickers on the back of the truck, along with the license plate (complete with county, as most southern plates are), and decided it would just be easier to make her only focus the back of a truck going to the same place, rather than worrying about the signs, the GPS, or the shoddy directions her father probably sent her. I don't know, though. I never really got a word in with her.

It was somewhere south of Greenville, just across the Georgia-South Carolina border, that she lost control of the car. I'd been checking the rear-view every once in a while to see if she was still there, and a few times between North and South Carolina I saw her check her phone and drift towards the median, only to jerk back into the lane a second later. This time, though, she didn't jerk it back. It almost looked as though she was just letting it drift into the grass in the center of the highway. She finally ripped the wheel back and sent her car rolling, its white paint now slinging mud and oil. I slammed on the brakes, skidded into the grass, and ran back to help her, pulling her limp body out of the car and filling my palms with broken glass and a stranger's blood in the process.

The last thing I remember about her was the way the mud and blood matted her hair. Georgia clay is glue when it's wet, and it, along with the blood creeping from the point of her gentle widow's peak, laid her hair flat in my hands and along the grass of the median. Raindrops kept the blood from her eyes and hid the tears I'm sure she was crying, but it made the black, curled mass of her hair like a woolen surplus blanket against my forearm. I wanted to lay her somewhere better, anywhere, but there was nowhere to place her that would keep her hair out of the glass and the clay, so I knelt there, waiting for an ambulance. I held her as gently as I could, this nameless girl, and watched her slip in and out. She breathed in quick gasps at first, shaking, visibly wondering where she was and jerking away from my bloody hands and then back into them when the pain, she realized, was just too much. She looked up at me after each spasm, her eyes wide and her lip, split from the crash, quivering; each time, her

eyes would slip closed slowly and roll backwards. If not for the gasping breaths of broken ribs I would've been sure she'd died twelve times before the ambulance finally rolled to a stop, but that was still so far away, and she was running out of time, so I stayed.

There was a rose tattoo on the left side of her neck, right below her ear-American traditional. It was only two colors, red and black. Three, only if you count the ever lightening porcelain color of her skin. The porcelain that was, of course, cracked in a thousand places. The color of her blood matched the rose petals perfectly, if only in the glow of shattered headlights and partial moonlight. I pressed my thumb over the center of the rose, trying to hold the two halves of her skin together like an accidental suture; I was not even the temporary solution, and I was going to lose her. She was begging me in silent gasps and fleeting whispers to keep her there, hold her grounded in southern dust. The rain, though, turned her into copper mud, and she was slipping backwards into the void. I didn't know what to do but hold her the way I had been for the count of three slips in and out of consciousness and forty-five speeding cars without so much as a brake light or a rubberneck.

She was still fighting four slips and sixty-two cars later, still jerking out of sleep and sliding back into my hand. I held it up against the top of her spine, like I was taught, though she moved enough for me to know that I was simply holding her spine still in her body and keeping the clamp shut so that her ribs didn't burst into wings and send her out of herself. She gasped twice when she looked behind me, her eyes growing wide and bright, and then shutting slowly, as though closing the blinds at the end of a day. The lights of the ambulance stretched out from behind my back like rays of tinted sunlight across the highway. The red of the siren turned her blood into tar, dripping even from the corners of her eyes. It seeped from the center of her rose and dripped from the de facto ring the crash had created on her lower lip. Nevertheless, they were here. Angels screaming into siren trumpets on their way to do as they do best.

They came in too fast. The tires screamed for mercy as they hydroplaned and slid into the back of the overturned car she was pulled from. I slumped over her to cover her from the glass. The sound of a second crash triggered something inside of her that brought her right back to the surface; her eyes shot open and the creeping blue light behind me lit her eyes up brighter than I'd imagined. The skidding of steel on asphalt and glass on skin, though not hers, made her shake like a bareboned wind chime; the glass both peppered off my soaking back and ripped its claws into me, touching me with leper-spots of blood through my shirt. Though I couldn't see it, the overturned hood of her car slid towards us like a guillotine. I stayed slumped over her and watched her eyes watch it slip closer and closer among the rock and water of the road. She had the same look in her eyes as it blotted out the warning lights that ancient people did when they saw their first eclipse. It was doomsday, and they were sure of it, though they had no shield over their sky. Still, as if halted by God himself, the white civic stopped before it flattened us, though putting corkscrews and debris into my back, further punishing me for keeling over her and trying to keep her alive. We slipped further into the mud and clay as we waited, though I was still stuck on this nailboard of a hood and she was still the same cracked porcelain doll she was when I'd found her. We waited.

The ambulance sat for what felt like hours before two angels came bursting out of the back and sprinted towards us, kits and tools in hand like flaming swords. One pulled me off of her with a gloved hand and leaned me, weaker than I'd thought, against the guardrail. The glass still lodged in my arm from the driver's side window from which I'd pulled her slid down and sliced me further than any of us had known. The twisted bits of hood and bumper pressed further into my shoulders as the guardrail and my fatigue laid them in like a vice that only they, the preoccupied angels, could loosen.

I, as she had, started to slip. I dug my nails into Georgia clay to keep myself grounded, but I could feel my hands sink deeper and deeper while my head rolled back and my eyes rolled skyward. I'm sure I was cracked porcelain to the God that was holding me. I'd wondered if it was the bleeding of the cross tattoo on my back that finally brought him down here, finally let him answer to the two reincarnations of Job he'd left on highway 85. I wasn't sure if the blue lights were making my eyes light up the way hers had, but I knew when each red light flashed that I was covered in blood, or tar, or clay.

Another set of sirens came, and with it, another set of lights, and then another, and then another. God had split open the sky for me and lit the world with headlights and flashing blues and then their flashing reds. Back and forth they went while they tended to her and then, almost by accident, found their way over to me, leaning on the guardrail, eyes pointed skyward. They slid me down, and my head cracked against the mud and stayed there, not bouncing, but stopping dead against the ground. I turned to see her just as they'd elevated the stretcher and brought her towards the dented angel's chariot. Her eyes were surely pointed skyward, with her temples sandwiched between plates meant to stabilize a neck injury she likely didn't have.

The last I saw of her as they rounded behind the car and further back into the ambulance was her hair, sticking out from the neckboard and still matted with blood and clay. It lay like an obsidian shield tied to her head, blocking out anyone who held it, passively rejecting the touch of skin from anyone trusted enough to touch her. I was given such trust only because she needed it, I guess. In another life, another world, this is exactly where we'd be. I'd likely never see her in a bar somewhere in Atlanta, buy her a drink, make small talk about the rose tattoo on her neck, or tell her, with my hand wrapped around the nape of her neck and the curled blanket of black hair, how blue her eyes were. I'd only see her again if they placed us next to each other in the hospital, or if I stumbled upon her stone growing out of the ground, but I didn't know where she was from or even her name. I wouldn't have known her in another life. I wouldn't have seen her the way I saw her then.