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The shop floor is always dirty. A century of grease and grit has been ground into the concrete beneath the shoes of men. Some of the last train tracks in Cheshire County are set in the shop floor from when it was a shoe factory. Years ago, someone poured concrete over the rails to level the floor, but the repairs crumbled away, leaving the tracks exposed in broken channels that quickly gather gunk and grime. The building's ancient, ugly bunker-like walls stand as proudly as ever, but rough, like the face of an old man, and the boarded-up windows give it an air of tomb-like secrecy, mysterious and lonely.

I began working at the shop at age twelve, and I have gone there on my bike almost every day since. It isn't far, but in the standard six-month New England winters, biking can be challenging. Imagine the fading light of a February afternoon: it's snowing, but I'm on my bike charging down unplowed roads as soon as school lets out. I can't wait to get to work. I love to fly along the asphalt with complete abandon; I keep a stopwatch fixed to the handlebars to time my rides, only stopping the clock when I've skidded to a stop at the shop's entrance. I enter through the door marked by the shop's only sign, a tiny peeling thing with the name "Fix" in black on yellowed plastic. I stash my bike behind the rack of windshield wipers, and I take it all in again: the air compressor's racket, the bitter scent of solvents, and the '75 Datsun 280z, its three shades of primer oddly resplendent in the flickering fluorescent light. I survey the work ahead of me while snapping on a pair of Black Lightning powder-free nitrile gloves.

I love working on a car, my arm thrust deep into its convoluted innards. I love a caked greasy Volvo 240 underside suspended above me as I remove a cancerous rusty hole before welding in a new piece of steel. In face shield and earmuffs, I saw out the disintegrated portion. With my real-life light-saber, I plasma-cut a piece of new sheet metal the size of the hole and, once it is hammered and trimmed into submission, it becomes one with the car by way of the trusty Lincoln Electric welder. Then I grind the seams until they disappear and the panel becomes whole. Equally, I love to build custom side-pipes or re-animate an engine — the roar of a newly modified Saab 99E 1703cc, that just last week was swaying on a chain like a stripped animal carcass, is sublime. But even the simplest tasks — changing a set of tires or replacing brake pads — delight me.

Outside lie some fifty cars on which I might ply my trade, some just waiting for an oil change, but many others lost in the limbo of passing years. Rot and decay consume them; eager knotweed bursts through their bellies. All around the building grasses and trees grow unhindered, an unsightly jungle, teeming with life. Crickets by the dozens hop aside as I walk through the waist-high grass, stray cats coolly ignore me. It is common to see the cats strutting down the dusty driveway, or to hear them fighting amongst the sea of cars in the untamed thicket.

Being at the shop alone in the evening is magical: looking out across the cars, as the sun silhouettes the dead treetops. At age twelve, I was sure I would be a mechanic but, having fulfilled that wish, I've come to realize that my intellectual and creative aspirations extend far beyond this gloriously dirty old shoe factory that I love so much. Even so, my time at Fix always seems too short, and, as I race home in the dark, I can think only about what I will work on when I return tomorrow.