*One day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed a boy picking something up and gently throwing it into the ocean. Approaching the boy, he asked, “What are you doing?” The youth replied, “Throwing starfish back into the ocean. The surf is up, and the tide is going out. If I don’t throw them back, they’ll die.” “Son,” the man said, “don’t you realize there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of starfish? You can’t make a difference!”*

After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it back into the surf. Then, smiling at the man, he said…” I made a difference for that one.” - Loren Eiseley

The Lost Starfish

There’s a beat-up gold sedan sitting at the top of our driveway this afternoon. The windows are down except when the inevitable afternoon storm blows in, and then I can only hope there is enough fuel left in the car’s tank for it to be started and the windows closed to keep out the hard rain. The back seat of the car is loaded with piles of clothes – your basic GAP, Hollister, American Eagle, and whatever it is the cool kids are wearing these days, and of course, brand name sneakers. Nothing is folded, and there is no doubt that everything has been thrown in hurriedly and with no thought to organization or care, as if the owner was fleeing a deadly wildfire. This back seat pile comprises all the material possessions of the sedan’s listless occupant, who, at the moment, doesn’t seem much concerned with fire, fun, freedom, or really anything at all.

Halley, like the comet that hurtles perilously close to earth every 75 to 79 years, is slumped in the driver’s seat of the car, slowly shuffling a handful of business cards, debit and credit cards, and photographs. Once in a while, she stops to straighten one of them out or flatten a curling corner, as if there is concern that they will be carefully replaced in a special slot in the leather wallet she once received as a gift. I notice the sticker on some of the credit cards hasn’t even been peeled off yet, but I don’t mention that to Halley. Her jaw is set in a fierce jut, and her hair, which looks a little greasier and has much less luster than I recall, is pulled back on her head in a ponytail, the kind used just to get it out of the way. The effect is maybe just what Halley wants – she seems to be angry at the world and ready to take revenge for a lifetime of slights both real and perceived.

She’s lost weight – again, and that would be enough to let me know she’s been using meth again. But the sores on her face and arms have already tattled on her, and she must be aware that I see them because she uses her tongue to defiantly flick at her lip piercings - two pieces of worn-looking silver on each side of her bottom lip, and for a moment, I am reminded of the strike of a serpent. But Halley isn’t a serpent, and even her ‘badass butch bitch’ act can’t be fooling anyone, even herself. She’s a sad, lonely kid with a tough past who thought everything would be perfect once she turned 18 and became an ‘adult.” Oh, if only it were that easy.

“I’m in a bad place,” Halley says, stating the obvious as though it wasn’t. “I just need to think, and sometimes I come here to do that,” she says, looking around her. The view from the driver’s seat of the once-shiny gold sedan can’t be a whole lot different than the one I’m seeing standing by the car. The shell of what was once a mid-sized manufactured home with just a few foundational supports still standing is the first thing you notice, the once-shiny panels of metal roofing waving like those inflatables outside of used car lots designed to draw your gaze to the new/used vehicle that symbolizes a life of freedom and travel to exciting, new adventures. There’s no doubt there was a fire – and not yesterday or last week, either. The debris is everywhere; chunks of insulation flap, and the only absolutely-recognizable piece of detritus is the remains of an air conditioner, and it wouldn’t take a degree to surmise that any possible saleable pieces of that have been purloined and used to buy cigarettes and pop, or maybe Flaming Hot Cheetos and sticky-sweet flavored vape juices. No less than eight non-functional vehicles serve as ornaments in the former home’s front yard, haphazardly left right where they stopped running – all of them at least two feet shorter because of the grass and Virginia creeper beginning their climb to cover them completely.

If you look closely, you’ll see that the back seats of any of the dead vehicles that have them are filled with clothes, much the same as the back seat of the car Halley is gazing out of right now. But Halley isn’t seeing that. If she’s seeing anything at all, it’s a past that she wishes she hadn’t wished away and maybe a handful of times when she felt the foreign feeling of hope for a future. And maybe she’s not even seeing that. Between the massive weight of the chip on her shoulder, her anger at the world for not being like it is in movies and video games, and the diminishing effects of the last high, it’s hard to know if there’s anything at all in Halley’s head except for hopelessness and hurt.

“How did I get here?” she mutters, shaking her head a little, as if to clear her vision. She turns in my general direction, not making eye-contact or even attempting it, like I’m the nurse who happened to be in the room as she began to emerge from a months’-long coma. In this moment, I’m not sure if she’s asking about her current situation or to this location on this day. No matter – the answer to both versions of the question is the same.

I can’t help thinking about that old Loren Eiseley story – the one about the man who meets a boy while walking on the beach. The man watches the boy bend over and toss starfish back into the sea again and again until he has to ask the boy why and, in typical adult fashion, let the boy know that there are thousands of starfish washed up on miles of beach and that his efforts won’t make a difference. Tossing another starfish back into the sea, the boy shrugs and says, “It made a difference to that one.”

I look at Halley, who seems as lost and hopeless as one of those starfish washed up on the beach with the tide. Maybe the man on the beach was right after all. I don’t want to believe it, but as I’m standing in front of the burned-out home and looking into the backseat at the mess that is Halley’s life, I feel helpless and lost myself, and not at all sure if I have enough hope or energy left in me to reach in and help pick Halley up and get her back on track again.