

Allison

Allison refused to hang her diploma on the wall. She worked full-time but had taken every class she could manage. In between work, caring for her family, and sleep, she finished her Bachelor's degree in three years. When the piece of paper came in the mail, Allison opened it in the car. She looked at it laying there on her lap; the gold foil insignia, her name in calligraphy. She put it back in the flat box, took it in the house and shoved it in a drawer. It was weeks before her husband thought to ask about the missing diploma.

Her supervisor at work wanted to host a little congratulatory luncheon for Allison once he found out she completed her studies. She dissuaded him and took the pay raise with no fanfare. The months ticked by and Allison didn't feel any smarter or more achieved than her colleagues. She quietly started taking online courses. She'd sneak in an essay on her lunch break, hide her homework in piles of laundry or in her briefcase. Not because her husband would recognize *New Approaches to Analytical Grammar*, she just didn't want the questions.

Two years of 10-page reports and 20-page financial aid packets culminated in a Master's degree. Her guidance counselor told her she could come walk the stage and receive her diploma on a Friday. She checked the flights for graduation weekend. She had an extra day of PTO she hadn't used. She'd been to Phoenix for work before, her husband wouldn't even ask about it.

Suitcase packed in the Corolla, she backed out of the driveway on Wednesday. He'd said his goodbyes from the couch. The children would stay with his mother while he was at work. The weather was supposed to be clear all week. A small hum started in her throat and she realized she was actually humming a tune, a song she heard on the Muzak at work. An unfamiliar smile crept across her face. She merged onto the interstate and almost laughed with happiness when she saw the green sign proclaiming "Houston 52." Less than an hour to Hobby airport.

The car began to rattle. Softly at first, but quickly turning into a deafening sound. The wheel started to shake under her hands. She pulled onto the shoulder just as smoke began to pour out from under the hood of her car. She turned the key off, reached for her purse in the passenger seat, and pulled out her phone. Allison called her husband.

"Why are you crying? It's just a conference."

She put the phone back in her purse, wiped her eyes and made sure her mascara wasn't smeared. As the tow truck arrived, Allison waited for her husband to come take her home.