

I sit with Roland and wait for the cab.

He isn't dead yet. Thank God. I wonder if he's staying alive for me.

He obviously likes me.

'Did you hear about Roland?' they'll say. 'Ill-starred Roland. Edith was gone. Yeah. Gone away on work. Yeah. Left Roland with Lester Lindeman...'

I tell him Sutton will be by later to take him for a walk. I beg him not to die. "Please don't die, Roland. Please. Be a good buddy." And he tilts his head in that way; rearranging the words into a question he really wants to hear: "Biscuit?"

I sigh. I give him a biscuit and watch him lick crumbs from the faux-hardwood floor. Why do I have to be the one to kill Edith Kingpin's dog?

I'll never have a dog of my own.

I keep replaying that telephone conversation in my head over and over and over again, until I'm mouthing the words and then speaking them. I feel like I'm rehearsing for it; like it's going to happen soon and I should just be prepared.

One last look in the bathroom mirror. I expect to see something different. But nothing has changed.

I see my father as I pull my face away - but when I look back it's me. Just me.

I fix my hair so that he's gone.

The cab driver helps me lift my bag. He warns me that I've probably already missed the bus. Then what do I do?

He's driving. He'll bring me to the next stop out of town. The wipers slick the rain away. A series of pictures develop for tiny seconds and the rain muddles them into mere impressions. Another snapshot. Muddled. Swipe. Muddled. Swipe. Muddled.

I want to tell him to drive faster. But I think, People only do that in movies. At the end of the street, I'm leaning forward in an attempt to propel the vehicle through the air. How badly do I want to get on that bus? How badly do I want to get home?

And then, some asshole is barmping his horn behind us. Pulls up. Even motions for us to stop.

He gets out in the rain, comes pounding on the window of the cab. Driver rolls the window down. It's Sutton. It's Sutton! And I think, That's it! Roland is gone. He's gone, he's dead!

"Open up the door," he tells the driver. "He's coming with me," he says, "I'm gonna take you home."

"No, you're not."

"Yeah, I took it off work. I'm gonna drive you home."

"No. You're not. Get out of the cab."

"You get out of the cab, I'm taking you home."

"Sutton. Man. I'm in a cab right now." I indicate the driver.

Driver says, "Getting to be an expensive cab there now."

I say, "I'm supposed to be gettin' on the bus. I'm gonna miss the bus!"

"Get out."

"You get out!"

"Get the fuck out!"

Driver says, "You're both out. Nine dollars please."

In the truck, I'm repeating the same five words: This, is, a, bad, idea.

"They'll just think I'm bringing you back."

"Oh. Then you *do* see the problem with this."

"I'm driving... You're not gonna get out unless I stop..."

And we pull up to a red light. I sigh. And the light goes green. His thick mitt jostles my thigh, and he grins.

I point, I say: "You can't say anything."

"I won't say anything. No one knows about me either, remember? I'll hold your hand in the church though."

"What is wrong with you?"

"Just being supportive, B-F-F."

"We'll just tell people that you decided to bring me home out of the kindness of your heart."

"And they would be getting pretty close to truth." He smiles, "It'll be a fun trip."

"Leisure and funeral are known to be synonymous."

"We'll find a really big space to camp out in the woods. We can look up at the sky. I brought the telescope. We'll look at the stars and just fuck for hours. Like in Bareback Mountains."

"It only takes seven hours to drive home, Sutton. We won't need to stay anywhere overnight."

Silence. And he says, "You need to respect me. Like I respect you."

"I respect you. I respect you differently; we show respect in different ways."

"We certainly do."

"No, I mean *us* as a whole, Sutton."

"Yes."

"The human -"

"Yes."

"- population."

The wipers swish and he says, "There's something in my backpack for you."

I search the open compartment. "All I see is a piece of paper."

"It's a piece of paper for you. It's got words on it."

The words are:

I was in the pipe of a flower. I was
in the balloon on the leg of a bee. I was
in the math of a honeycomb cluster. I am
a particle in the heavens

I am ice, I am water, I am
dust. I am spinning past a nebula. I am
pulled by a moon of four hundred volcanos. I am
sailing past Andromeda, at full mast.
And it's so close

And I cannot see the face of God.

He was in the vein of an onion. He was
in the same old rain that's falling. He was
floating beside me. In outer space.
I'm here.

Where are you?
He says, "It reminded me of you."
"Who wrote this?"
"I wrote it."
Woosh. Woosh. Woosh. I say, "You remember that time that you slept at my house, and
you missed your Mom so much you had to go home and I had to sleep alone?"
"I've more than made that up to you. And you did the same thing at my house."
"I did not!"
I'm refolding the creases in his poem.
"You drank a little juice box-sized carton of milk and you said you were sick. Then your
Dad had to come over to walk you home."
"I don't remember that at all." I stuff Sutton's poem into a random pocket and zip it shut.
"Wuss."

"You sleeping?" Sutton asks.
"No. I'm looking at the rain."
"Same rain," he smiles.
"I'm not ready to go home."
Home. Like a nest of slugs. Everyone moving in slow, slow motion and leaving behind a
trail showing where they've been. Maybe that'll happen to me now too. They'll see my slug juices
all over the seat of Sutton's truck.
I say, "This is a bad idea. We can't be together in that church. You can't touch me or
anything. Not when we're inside the church, not when we're home, not at all. Anywhere."
"Jesus. Okay, fine!"
Sutton skims through the stations on the radio for approximately infinity and stops the
dial at CHiTFM. He turns the volume way down low.
He says, "I pretended to be dying, every single Sunday. So that I didn't have to go to
Sunday school."
"Every week. I remember."
"'Mom, I don't feel very good.' Stay home, lie in bed. Watch TV."
"Every week?"
"But it was like God knew. Like God'd arranged that dead zone network programming
when he created lights and ribs and apples and the rest of the universe.
"'Let there be Sunday School! And whosoever does not attend this School of Sundays,
may he be stricken with temptation of a bright sunny afternoon, and decades old action movies
on TBS Superstation.' And it was no good."
Sutton shakes his head dramatically.
"Well, you love action movies."
"I don't!"
"You watched one yesterday."

"Miss Congeniality is not an action movie, Lez."

And I say, "You know, you're not being very supportive."

"I'm not."

"Well, the poem, and the -"

"What's wrong with the poem?"

"I just can't believe in that. I would think that you, of all people, would know that."

Silence. And pop music.

I say, "I just have to think, I'll see Dad again. Like heaven's a big white waiting room. We show up, put an X next to the last name on our checklists, and dive back down through the clouds. Ready to play the next one. And maybe someday we'll meet up at that celestial pulpit, say, "Hey." And we'll be souls returning to earth. On a big slippery watery slide."

Sutton doesn't say anything.

Hours later, I wake from a dream. Getting close to home. I was with Dad.

We were pinning flapping grocery bags onto a clothesline. No words. Only the cackle of wet plastic obscuring our faces. And that tiny dull throb of joy.

I sit up and wipe the drool from my face. And from the seat belt. And I see a creature skitter underneath the truck. Sutton swerves! There's a car coming right at us. He spins back into the lane and my hand goes to his on the wheel. He's breathing hard and I can feel the veins in his arm.

"Oh my God," I say.

"It's okay, I didn't hit it."

"Oh my God," I say it again. I'm panting now.

"Fuck, it's okay! It was just a bunny rabbit."

No. It's not okay: "Roland."

Mom leans into me, she says, "Poor Sutton, Lester. He drove you home. You could say something to him at least. Maybe it'll help you."

She stands to admire my father's likeness once more: "He looks just like his-self."

He does not. Where is he?

Sutton's knee presses into mine. We're sitting in the front pew, Sutton's head between his thighs. Hands mumble comfort across his shoulder blades. Shoes whisper past us. He's leaving two salty little puddles on the indoor-outdoor carpet, between his feet. On his thick arm, I administer a swift rub and into his ear I barely-whisper a reminder: "I'm here." In the same building where we learned about slithering serpents.

Sutton's face is a noiseless howl. His head dives between his legs once more. And he emerges with, "Remember the time your Dad put snowshoes on us? I got the hang of it, real quick. And you just kept sticking in the snow. Then you fell down and started tearing at your legs like a rabid animal. You were kicking and screaming. I thought you were gonna gnaw your foot away."

"You're embarrassing my Mother."

"What?"

"She thinks I should be crying too."

"That why you're finally talking to me?"

"What?"

"She hopes I'll make you cry?"

"She thinks I hate Dad. But I just can't stop thinking about Roland."

Little liquid dots line his long lashes: "Do you think you'll ever try it again?"

"What?"

"Snowshoeing."

I smile, "No."

Sutton sits up and turns to look at the church. Someone is saying "See you" to my Mother. She hugs the goodbye shoulder tight.

"You used to sit right here. And I used to sit back there." His fingers clasp absently.

"When we prayed, I always imagined God was listening from the other side of that curtain, up behind the shiny horns." He sobs.

I stare at him. Then I survey the room. "Maybe he still is."

"No."

"How do you know that? It's never open."

"I peeled it back one time. Just a blank wall." He blinks. Then, "He just flung you over his shoulder and brought you back in the house. You were kicking and screaming." He says, "Why didn't you ever want to sit with me?"

"Cause my Mom had better candy."

Mom stands, waving in the storm porch door. Crying a little.

She shouts, "Thanks for bringing him home now!"

Sutton returns her gesture through the rolled-open window, and he pulls down the drive. I'm on the phone to Edith Kingpin's house again. Hoping she'll be there. Hoping Roland will take it to mean that someone is coming. Roland will you just please - just pick up the phone!?

At the end of the lane, Sutton stops for a sign and kisses my face.

"We're still home!" I'm screaming at him. I crane my head around, but no one's stolen a glimpse.

"Will you pay for gas?"

He drives until the sun is a streak.

Just outside of town, Sutton declares, "I have to go to sleep now, Lez." He pulls over to the side of the road. "I can't drive," he shakes his head, "We'll die."

"What? Roland!"

"Roland is fine!"

"He's going to die. He swallowed a barbeque grill rag!"

"Are you sure about the rag?"

"I can't find it! I saw him with it."

"Lez, Edith Kingpin knows her dog is gonna die. He's thirteen. She expects it."

"I don't want to be the one to kill Edith Kingpin's dog."

"Stop it. He's not gonna die."

"There's already a giant vase of dead flowers on her dining room table!"

"Oh, those flowers were meant to die."

"But what if they weren't?"

"Did you feed them a charred sauce rag, too?"

Silence.

"Was there water in them?"

"Yeah."

He shrugs. "You're safe." Sutton parks the car and stares up into the sky. He sits back. He looks at me and smiles with dangerous eyelids.

"I'm starving. You have to keep driving."

"Let's set up the telescope in the back."

"If you're not gonna drive, I'm not going to sit here and look at little fires burning a million miles away. While Roland is dying!"

"Well, *you're* not gonna drive." Sutton opens his door and grabs his telescope from behind the seat: "I'll just have a picnic by myself then." He lifts a bag filled with styrofoam containers from the back seat.

I say, "What's that?"

"It's a feed." He grins. "Your Mom gave it to me when we were leaving."

He shuts the door and climbs into the back of the truck.

"What kind of little-bitty particles you think make up those rings?"

Sutton's telescope is pointed straight up at the big black sky.

"Pieces of rocks I guess."

He shovels more salad into his mouth. Then he offers me a taste.

"I've got my own, thank you."

He says, "Have a look."

"I'm only here for the food. When I'm done eating, I'm getting back inside."

"Not without the key."

He dips his wet pupil back into the tide of stars.

He says, "You know, when you're exposed to the vacuum of space, the pressure forces all the air outta your body."

I sigh.

"Your vacated lungs cry out for breath. So, every single one of your blood cells team up and push all their oxygen back into your lungs."

I drag the edge of my fork along the plate and prong the pink potato.

"When the breathless blood reaches your brain, it whispers, screams, 'No! I thought you'd bring oxygen! Where's the oxygen?' You asphyxiate. You die and you drift forever."

I set my plate down, and I say, "Okay, let's have a look."

He tells me, "It's best to stretch out on your back. Lie underneath. For your first time." I get into position and he says, "You know I bet we could scream as loud as we want to out here. And only the animals would hear us."

First glance: Saturn is just a picture. But then, I see its surface turning.

Where are you?

"What do you think the survival rate is for souls whose bodies combust in the fire of a star? Or fall past an event horizon? Do you think they come right back to earth and start right over?" Sutton stands, and begins to sing an old favourite at the top of his lungs: "I want a revival in my soul. I want a revival in my soul."

I gaze up at him.

He slaps his knee, and he sings, "I want to be washed in the blood of Jesus. I want a revival in my soul." He prompts: "All the girls!"

I oblige, "Send down the rain!"

He sings, "Oh glory!"

I shout, "Send down the rain!"

"Oh glory!" His voice fills up the rings around that lonely looking planet, which until now, has been so quiet, I think it might be living inside my head.