

She drives fast and not very well, but I have never died in her car. She drives as though she forgot she had feet. She steers with one finger hanging limply on the wheel, her other hand in her lap. She hums and whistles to music. She makes up names and jobs for the people in the cars we pass. She never shares those names with me, even when I bug her to. She says “you’ve got to make up your own, I can’t interpret the world for you.”

She drives fast on highways. She prefers driving on highways. I sometimes ask her if she wants to take backroads, and she says “I’m definitely gonna die in a car crash, but I don’t want to take a kid with me.” She drives fast and doesn’t look at the scenery. She drives fast to nowhere. I go over to her house to get high after work. She’s the kind of girl who lives alone but forgets to lock the door, and the kind of girl who’s nonplussed to find you on her scratchy orange couch playing PS2 on her cathode-ray TV. She orders broccoli pizza 4 nights a week and shares it with me and beats me at Tony Hawk and at 10pm demands that we go on a drive. She’s the girl I always say yes to.

She’s the kind of girl who pulls over when she sees a road with a chain across it, a park closed for the season, the corpse of a Blockbuster video in a strip mall with no tenants. She’s the kind of girl who wakes me up from my weed sleep and says “we’re here,” even though she knows I know she never intended to end up here. She’s the girl who breaks the plywood off the windows of graffitied buildings. She’s the girl with a few hundred misdemeanors in her pocket, with such supernatural good luck that she’s talked to an on-duty policeman once in her life.

I’m the kind of girl who follows her into abandoned places, who sleeps in the car and navigates when she needs to get home. Who looks over my shoulder cuz one of us has to. Who watches her take pictures of the words on the walls and listens for ghosts. But to be fair to myself, I’m also the kind of girl who, once the spirits have been placated and no one is coming, finds

the room with the least broken glass and the most beautiful view and presses her against the wall. I'm the one who gets horny and starts shit, and the girl who ends up getting fucked in the ass against the wall, one hand in her hair and the other braced against a spraypainted anarchist symbol and some sharpie saying "Brian sucks fat cock." I'm the girl who ends up naked in the rubble, cum on my hands, in prayer, filled with the spirit.

She's the girl who finds a liminal broken world. I'm the one who makes it ours. She's the one who breaks down the door. I'm the one who leaves something on the wall to mark our passage. Sharpie and cum and blood, once.

We drive back fast, and it takes less time to get home. She drops me off at my house unless I've fallen asleep in the car, in which case I wake up on her couch with no memory of returning there, wearing her pajamas, my underwear missing. She's the kind of girl who can guide a girl into a third-floor walkup without waking her up. She knows I'm the kind of girl who would try to give her my panties as payment.

She's the kind of girl who eats the cold, unrefrigerated broccoli pizza for breakfast. I'm the kind of girl who would try to make her eggs, only to have her eat one or two bites of it, so I sit next to her on the floor and eat twice as much as I should, because it's a shame to waste. We're both the kind of girls who don't like to touch each other during the day.

Before I found her, I wasn't alive. I lived alone in a big house with 6 people who were all friends but not with me.

My life wasn't bad so much as it didn't exist. It wasn't that I needed challenge, it was that every small thing was so much of a challenge that I had no ability to start building myself a ladder to a life worth living. I had enough money to eat badly and make rent and pay for medication. I was too reasonable for true self-annihilation, and too exhausted and hazy for true self-improvement. I floated through the world with no true problem except my own accidentally-self-imposed isolation, and no true joy. It was a life entirely squandered, entirely unworthy of being lived, so I thought about ending it often. But I was too weak-willed to even do my own hormone injections, it seemed unlikely I would be strong enough to break open my wrists.

Six months ago, I had broken up with someone who had loved me very much because I was tired of having him watch me wither, and I wanted to dry up and blow away in peace. I figure that his love was mostly inertia anyway. There was nothing loveable about me.

I learned there is something very appealing to a broken soul about the body of Christ. That there once existed a man who would have, and did, give up everything so that I personally could be saved. That the only thing I had to muster for him was thanks. Because I could muster that. I could go to church and cry in church. When I did, middle-aged women would give me tissues and attempt to talk to me and I would be unable to reply to them, unable to speak in my abject vulnerability. I loved Jesus with what was left of my heart. And because my heart was desiccated and the size of a dried rose, that meant that I thought fondly of him and tried to make the effort to speak to him sometimes, and I passively wished for someone to take me to him. I knew that supposedly if I killed myself I wouldn't go to heaven, even though I was also pretty sure that he would understand if I did. But to be on the safe side, what I really asked him for was to be murdered.

I looked back with fondness on the days when I could act half-heartedly. I was down to an eighth of a heart, and getting smaller every day.

I met her through a witch named Ellis, whom I bought drugs from for years. Ze lived in a house just off the campus of the college I went to, and had lived there for 15 years. What I knew about hir was that ze routinely ripped off the rich kids at the school, and cut deals for the poor kids, and if ze ever caught you sharing her drugs with any of hir children, ze would kill you. Hir children were a constantly changing group of transgender runaways who filled the spare rooms of hir large house. Ze took them in like stray cats and released them into the world when they were able to walk themselves. Ze loved hir children, and they were fiercely loyal to hir.

I wish I could say I met hir because ze had taken me in in a vulnerable moment and showed me kindness. I wish I could say I had run away from an abusive home to sleep on hir couch, and to talk with hir in the early morning about how to reorient myself, newly independent and lonely. I wish I could have called hir mother. Instead I knew hir cuz I had gone to the college and bought mid-grade weed with my work-study money. So I envied the unlucky souls who inhabited hir messy home, those waifs with nowhere else to go. I would have traded my lukewarm relationship with my lukewarm parents, and their lukewarm acceptance of my humanity, for trauma and an abusive childhood, if it meant growing into adulthood with that haphazard, transient family. Shamefully, I think I still would.

But she, the driver, the girl who saved my life, she was one of hir many many children. In the late days of my depression, I was working my way through Ellis's stock, trying to find a chemical that would either kill me or show me salvation in the waking world.

I bought a strong strange designer drug one day, and while I was at hir house, there was a woman who I didn't recognize sitting at her mother's counter, in a headscarf and Doc Martens. She had the face of someone rudely interrupted in a moment of vulnerability. My dealer introduced us, and I forgot her name immediately.

I take too much of the designer drug that night, and end up in a state of psychosis on Ellis's porch, banging on the door, calling his mother, asking what I had done to make him stop loving me. Ze opens the door for me, and the woman who I had met earlier that day volunteers to drive me home.

She doesn't take me home. I tell her I am scared to be alone, and she drives me around the freeways that circle the city, for 2 hours, until my crash starts. She talks the whole time (the first thing she tells me was to forget about talking myself). She tells me about all the pets she had ever had. She tells me about a philosophical concept she came up with that she calls "Faggot Ontology." She recites for me impressively long passages from the Quran, and tells me about her giving up and reconstructing her faith.

As I am sobering up, I puke on my dress in her car, and then again on the side of the highway. She waits in the driver's seat, smoking her fourth cigarette of the evening. Somewhere closer to sober, but not sober, I take off my vomit-covered dress and leave it on the side of the road. And she drives me back to her house in my panties, half-heartedly covering my tits with my arm as I walk up the steps to her door. She gives me a very soft, ripped, ancient shirt. She gives me heavy flannel pajama pants, and lets me lie down on her couch. I ask her, half-asleep, how I could repay her. I offer her a blowjob, and she says "maybe later" in a tone that was almost cruel.

She smokes in an armchair in the same room with me. I ask her if she was going to go to sleep, and she says that it was far too late for that. I fall asleep with tears on my face, flabbergasted and barely comprehending that someone could have given me this amount of kindness, hating myself for being so unworthy of this care. I cry quietly and she declines to notice or comment. She tries to preserve my pride, not understanding that I have none left.

I wake late the next morning, violently ill and unbearably embarrassed. She has left for work and has left a note on the counter telling me to stay as long as I needed, but warning me that the door locked automatically, so if I left, I would have no way to get back. So of course I have to stay until she comes home again. I do not truly have another option. I have to see her again, and if I leave, I have no way of contacting her short of wandering to her building unannounced one day and praying that her doorbell worked. So I stay in her apartment, in her supernaturally well-lit living room, feeling increasingly silly and impolite as the day passes.

When I'm vomiting in the bathroom, I try to avoid reading the labels on the pill bottles. I try not to touch the things in the chaos of her bedroom, clothes piled on every square inch of floor minus a trail of footprints leading to her bed. I lie on her couch and drift in and out of sleep, feeling awkward and outside of myself, feeling embarrassed that I haven't left already. But feeling so so much, so much safer than I ever have in my own bedroom. A linden tree taps against the window. Different trees tap against every window.

She and I spend an evening at her mother's house. Ellis greets us at the door and ze puts me to work setting the table for eight. I do not know where anything is, and am too shy to ask, so the driver helps me. I ask her not to leave my side, that I'm scared, and she says that I'm gonna to be okay.

She introduces me to Ellis's cat, and tells me that he's 25 years old and can tell the future. I cannot tell if she's joking. Ellis, from the other room, says that it's true, and that he'll never die, and then ze tells me to add another place setting, someone new is coming.

I push food around my plate. I have a hard time eating. She is on one side of me, and on the other is a tragically skinny, genderless beauty, putting food into their mouth with methodical determination. Every once in a while, I see them make eye contact with Ellis, who nods, approvingly and subtly. The chairs are pushed together tight, and I keep knocking elbows with them, but they never seems to notice. My one friend is making conversation with a middle-aged, perfectly androgynous person with a voice like water. I am watching. I want to eat but I can't. It's too much.

Ellis stands up. Ze says a prayer over the food. Ze says that this dinner is in celebration of Ty's first day on testosterone. A small boy on the other end of the table blushes furiously as everybody shouts "Mazeltov," and the people near him put their hands on his shoulders and squeeze. Ze welcomes me by name and says "welcome to the family" and I start bawling immediately. The thin one beside me asks to hold my hand. I nod. My friend doesn't need to ask. I cry ugly sobs as I thank them. I do not deserve it, I do not belong here. I want to belong here. I have never wanted anything more in my entire life.

As the night goes on, I watch her talk to people. I watch her face light up when a very tall woman with a shaved head walks into the house. I watch her flit from person to person, knowing everybody, loving everybody, full of

belonging. I feel jealousy. I do nothing about it and would never voice it, and am ashamed to find it in my heart.

Late that night, she is outside talking with her mother. I am sitting next to the person who had held my hand at dinner, who is named Keller. We had talked for a bit. I like them. We hold hands some more. Their hands are large and their wrists are barely there. I don't really have anything I can say. She is talking to someone else now. I am drifting between belonging and alienation. Sometimes Keller is leaning against me and whispering to me like we've known each other for years, sometimes they are across the room, and that 15 feet is an uncrossable ocean. Belonging to alienation to belonging.

When I open the window, I can hear her talking with Ellis, but I can't make out what they are saying. I imagine that they are talking about me. About how untenable it is that she is my only means of social support. About how she likes me and loves me but if I can't stop relying on her, she won't be able to continue being around me. I imagine her sighing and saying "It's okay. I mean, what I'm giving her isn't as much as you gave me," and I imagine ze responding "so you're paying off your debt?" and she says "yes, finally," and ze says "good girl, it's about time."

A long time later, in a mall parking garage at 2 in the morning, I ask her what they had talked about that night. She tells me that, basically, I had it right. That she had been saying she was hopeful I'd hit it off with Keller or somebody, to take some of the pressure off her. But mainly they were reminiscing about the years, in hir younger days, when Ellis had been a trans man, and had been commiserating at length about the negative effects of testosterone.

Six weeks into our friendship, I hit another low point. Which is inevitable. I crash every week or so, but this one is worse. It comes suddenly one morning, one of the times she lets me sleep in her bed, one of the nights we had sex. I end up curled at her feet like a dog, unworthy and racked with despair. She burps and drools in her sleep, and the sound, which I had adored, now grates on me. I lie on her feet as she sleeps for 4 more hours, until the sun lines up with the window, and she wakes bathed in light.

I had been in a stupor for those four hours, thinking about degenerate and violent things to do with my flesh, after I had flayed it off myself. The brutality of my fantasies was easier to live with than the other thought in my mind: that this relationship, which I needed, was deeply unstable, and was going to require my changing, and possibly true recovery, for it to become something other than a gunshot in slow motion.

She asks me what's wrong when she sees my face, and I have the wherewithal to joke that I am hungover, which she understands literally, and brings me bacon and cold water. She has never cooked for me before. "Eat it," she says, "it's the only thing that helps the nausea." I eat it and cry when she leaves the room again. She is carrying a mug of instant coffee when she returns. She sits on the bed next to me, listening to me cry, drinking slowly from the mug and looking out the window.

Outside the window is a tree with large leaves. A tropical tree somehow thriving in the northeast soil, an unworthy transplant flourishing out of spite. When the tears pass, I watch the leaves flicker in the wind as the clouds begin halfheartedly to precipitate. It half-rains, half-snows. She doesn't talk to me and doesn't touch me. She never touches me except when she wants to fuck me. It is one of her rules. Otherwise, she would say, how would you know when I wanted to have sex? When I suggested she could tell me, she smiled, shook her head, and said "yeah, that just doesn't seem realistic."

Her eyes clear of sleep as her coffee cup empties, and once she is awake she inclines her head to the east and closes her eyes for a second. I am scratching hard red lines into my skin, and I look away embarrassed as she prays a small prayer. Her devotion is simple, understated, earnest. She treats her religion like she treats her hair. She brushes it most days, washes and conditions it with the cheapest bottles she can find at a pharmacy. When it becomes too large for her to maintain, she cuts off pieces until it's manageable again. Twice, when she was young, before she became herself, she tried to cut it all off. It had grown to below her waist, and she was embarrassed by it, and what it revealed about her. But it grew back.

She eats the other half of my bacon, because I grew sick after eating only half of it, and because it is a shame to waste. She tells me she has the day off and we're going for a drive. I tell her she said last night that she had work today. She insists she has the day off and to get in her car. I say I'm not up for it, I'm sorry, I crashed really hard, I don't know, I can't, I'm sorry I just I just, I can't. She tells me to get into her fucking car.

Her use of profanity scares me enough that I manage to pull myself up off of my bed. I am wearing only sweatpants. She throws two sweaters at me and I pull them over my head. She wraps her head in a scarf and walks me out the door.

The weather is horrible, freezing and gloomy, rain and wind and darkness. Her car is warm and dry. Her face is cold. We don't ask each other what's wrong. We drive, both some kind of miserable, listening to the rain and the squeak of the windshield wipers. She reaches to turn on the radio, but there is only static.

We drive for over an hour. I calm down on the drive, and she does too. But just a bit. It's now just that I'm not bursting into tears every couple of minutes, and she's humming intermittently to the radio that's now playing

static with a light infusion of pop-40. Her face is still still, and we still don't talk. Once or twice, I apologize, but she says "no apologies needed," and turns up the radio until the crackles hurt my ears. I sit back. She has a plan. I can trust her plan. It couldn't be worse than staying alive for even one more day.

We stop in a forest. The rain is over, and there is mist rising from the wet ground. She tells me to get out. I do. I am still barefoot, and the ground is squishy, and my toes are instantly numb. She walks me into the woods. There's a path that wasn't obvious. She moves like she's been here before. I have no idea where we are.

The cliff isn't very far from the road. There is a rotten fence riddled with holes in front of it. There are crushed beer cans and old names scarred into trees. There is the sound of trucks in the distance, but I can see no road. My feet hurt pretty badly, and the pain is waking me up. Over the cliff, it's a steep fall, and lethal. She has led me to a place where I could end my life, if I want to. I look at her. She's looking at the cliff. She is openly afraid. I realize she doesn't know what the hell she's doing here.

The logic makes a perverse sort of sense. She wants me to see the awesomeness and horror of my desire, she wants me to be cowed by the enormity of death. She wants me to take the jump or shut up. I can see her thinking it, 30 minutes into our drive, having feigned confidence and a plan. And this was the only thing she could think of to do. This awful ultimatum. So she committed to a terrible plan, because she had to commit to something. But she can't say "jump, coward." As determined and tired and bored with me as she is, she cannot be that cruel.

Because she loves me. Or something close to it. Because she doesn't want me to die, to even come close to dying. Truly she doesn't want me to even consider it. So she can say nothing.

So we stand in silence at the edge of a cliff, and then i tell her that my feet hurt and we go back to the car, and for a moment, we understand each other. I think about her and her foolhardiness for most of the trip back. It is the first time in a long time i've thought about something other than myself. I realize, at the cliff, I did not consider jumping off. I was distracted by watching her. Pricks of heat run through my feet like biting ants under my skin. She drives, fast, home.

That night I feel worse. The next day, slightly better. Then nothing, then bad again. There is no simple pattern. Time passes. We go driving, but never to my death.

Over the next few months, I did get better. I started to spend more and more time at her place. She treated me different than anyone I'd known. She didn't seem affected by my presence, in a very profound way. She went about her leisure just as she would have had I been absent. She did not host me. She simply accepted my existence. She paid attention to me when I asked her to, or when her whim struck her. I joked to her that she treated me like a cat. She responded that she just treats cats like people. Sometimes at night I'd sleep in her bed, sometimes on the couch. Sometimes we fucked, sometimes we went a week without touching each other.

We never said we loved each other, we rarely held hands outside of sex, we were not lovers. I would do things for her, though. I told myself it was to repay her, but I never said that to her. I would buy her jewelry and video games. I would make her food that she was very excited for but never finished. I papered her apartment in post-it notes with sweet messages from her friends for her birthday. I showed her I loved her, and she saw what I did for her with a bemused detachment. With not too much affection, but with acceptance. She did enough for me and she knew it. She allowed me to exist within her world. She accepted me into her life and folded me in, as though I had always been meant to be there.

We drive fast on highways to places that God has forgotten. To places outside of the eye of man, where the signs that say "no trespassing, under surveillance" are overt bluffs. We drive fast to the empty places, and make our home in the decay. We make our home in the car, in speed. We carry our home with us always.

We drive fast, and I sleep in the passenger seat while she steers with one finger, with cruise control on, at 95 miles an hour, and I have faith that I will wake up again.

Before we eat, I would like to speak. I would like to say congratulations to Ty! This is his first day on testosterone, and not the last. May your body become a home for you, and may all the doors to your future be ever open. We love you, we trust you, you are family. You will always have a place at this table. May your happiness and your hormones never run dry. Wine for Ty. MAZELTOV!

Also, welcome to Evelyn, her first day around our table, and not the last. Welcome to our family. Wine for Evelyn.

Wine also for the world to come. Wine for the radical children and the world that they will create. Where when the gods come in disguise, they will be greeted at the doors with bandages and food and blankets, and will not be ashamed to have created this earth. Where the doors of the buildings are left unlocked. And heated in the winter. Where the doors to the town hall conference rooms are left open. Where the prisons rot with iron bars swung wide. Wine for the hospitable world. Wine for the kind world. Wine for love.

Wine for you, my family. Wine for me.

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