

In the Car with Dad

I am in the car with Dad. I am in the backseat, and we are on the bridge. It is daytime, but every time I am here, on the bridge, I think of nighttime too. I never wanted to sleep, so Dad and I would pile into the car and drive. I don't remember sleeping, but I remember that the car was always warm and safe. I would lean my cheek against the window and take it all in. The buildings were lit up and sparkling. Over and over again, they reflected in the water. One solid city stood in front of us and then a million more wavered beneath the surface of the river.

Today, the sun is out. Years distance me from those sleepless nights. The city looks green and alive. Dad is saying something. The sun shines through the windows. I can only see the back of his head while he is talking.

Years continue to pass. I can't remember what he said. We used to talk about a lot of things in the car on the bridge, but that particular time I can't remember. I only remember the sound of what he said. The rhythm of his words sticks in my mind. It is just the beginning of his sentence, I think. It is a breath, a wind-up into speech, and then the percussion of words forming in his mouth. This sound loops and loops and loops and loops in my head. I wish I could say exactly what it sounds like, but I can't quite grasp it anymore. Even if I could, I wouldn't know how to write it down. It is its own kind of music. It repeats and repeats and repeats. I hear it and I am on the bridge, in the car, with Dad. It is daytime, but only for a second, because then I am remembering, and it is night, and we are driving, and it is safe, and I am asleep.

Dream

I am driving in the dream. This seems normal to everyone else. I am young, maybe nine. I don't know how to drive but I am in the driver's seat anyway. The passenger tells me to just keep going. The passenger is Dad, or my neighbor, or my friend. Any of them can be in this dream. I dream it often. I am already driving when the dream begins. Then I realize that I don't know how to drive. It is not a secret—no one finds it out or finds it odd. Not Dad, nor my friend, nor my neighbor. They tell me to keep going. *Figure it out*, they say. I try to, but I start and stop, and make strange, wobbly turns around my neighborhood. I don't crash, and there is no accident, but I am bad at it. Very bad. I am a bad driver, and I am too young to drive, and I am driving.

When Dad was in the passenger seat, I asked him, *Dad, why am I driving?* He just shrugged and said nothing. I don't know if he could talk in the dream even if he tried. I tried to turn and then crashed. I woke up.

Kind

I think of what Dad must have looked like when he bought the bottles from the gas station. Everyone probably liked him. He is a man that people like, because he is kind. The man behind the counter probably remembers him and smiles.

Someone, not me, found bottles in Dad's car. The bottles were not soda bottles. Wine bottles from the gas station—that's the kind of bottle I remember being there. That's what I remember being told about. I am sure there were other kinds.

They probably rolled and clinked when the car drove. On all of those drives I never heard that sound. Did it blend into everything?

I have pictured the bottles many times, and they are always in the car. In reality they were also in the basement and tucked into the kitchen cabinet. I think of the bottles in the car.

Bullshit

It was a tense night, so I drank a lot. Friends didn't like friends anymore. A game of B.S. turned into a metaphor for grievances housed deep in our bodies. I lied about having two aces. Rude remarks were said and laughed at. We were not the people we would want to be in the morning.

I went to the bathroom, looked in the mirror, and saw myself doubled. I decided to drink more. I remember how conscious that choice was. *I am drunk and I am going to get drunker.* I lay down on the carpet, and probably sang and philosophized. My hand of cards was splayed out on the floor. I had a third of the deck because I was a bad liar. I remember waving my arms around. I remember how the bumpy ceiling twirled into different creatures and shapes. It was, 'look at me, look at me' kind of stuff.

Then it was time to throw up. I went to the toilet, and my friends said *poor baby*. The ceramic was cold against my cheek. The room was spinning, and I thought that I should call my mom in the morning.

Blunt

We crashed into each other. She gave me a blunt. I coughed the smoke back up and made my joke: *I've been smoking since I was fourteen but I'm still really shitty at it.* The cheap strobe

light flashed pink then blue across her face. She had curly hair. She fixed the cuff in my sleeve.

We tripped back to her place and landed sprawling on the couch. She played with my hair until I fell asleep and kissed me in the morning.

It could have been bad, but it wasn't. It could have been a drunken mistake, but it wasn't. I woke up before her and made coffee. She mumbled in her sleep. I took note of the sound. She had a French press like mine. It still had grounds in it from the day before, which I liked.

She woke up. She stretched her arms up big when she yawned. She kissed me and we moved to the shower. I was struck by how I was doing everything I would do in the shower alone, except she was there, and it didn't feel strange. I got a good look at her. She was looking back at me. Looking for real.

I moved out of my body for a moment and stared down at the ease of us. The blue bathroom tile. The bar of soap. How did our clothes look so perfect on her bathroom floor? She squeezed my hand as if she knew where I was. I came right back.

Cook

I cook pasta with Dad whenever I make it home. The two of us understand the importance of ritual. You pour flour onto a cutting board and make a hole in the center. You crack eggs inside and stir them together slowly. Dad urges me to be more patient with the mixture as it binds. We have an old metal machine that we run the dough through over and over and over again. Once the dough is flat it goes through the attachment that cuts it. The noodles come out long and spindly. He watches over my shoulder as I add things to the sauce. We eat it, and watch

old TV shows we love. I usually get to pick because he makes a point to like what I like. He takes real interest. We laugh easily.

When we cook together like this it seems that nothing bad could have ever happened. It seems that our love will always exist like this, a repetitive process of care. But I come home less now.

Lucky

There is a memory I don't remember. Not all of it. I've been told about it though. Dad was driving me to the doctor's office. We made it all the way there. I sat through my appointment. The doctor pulled a big, waxy, black lump out of my ear. I picked out a cherry lollipop. The doctor called Mom and said he wasn't sure that Dad could take me back home. He said he wasn't sure that Dad was really awake. He said he wasn't sure what happened, but that Dad was there, slumped in the waiting room, sleeping fitfully, and snoring. I must have been there too, but I don't remember that part. I don't remember him sleeping. What I remember is checking my lollipop wrapper on the way home to see if there was a star on it. If there was, that would mean I was lucky. Mom's face was so careful in the rearview mirror.

Impact

There was an accident, but nobody died. I was sitting shotgun and looking right at him, and then we were in the air, beautifully suspended. It occurred to me that his eyes were closed. He'd been fighting off the impact for the past mile, his eyes fluttering, nodding, winking, trying

to stay open. *Dad?* I said and he said, *I'm fine*. I left the car and watched everything from above.

I know both our bodies were flung forward but, I swear, I didn't move a muscle.

Stories

Dad is the best storyteller I know. He knows what details hold the truth. Like how his friends used to only curse when they were at the pond behind the dump, or how I used to ask permission before chewing a piece of gum, or how Dad's Dad used to tell him that at the end of the day we are all alone. My best stories aren't real at all. Like when Dad and I dove into the river.

Dive

Once, Dad and I dove into the river that the bridge goes over. It was nighttime and we landed in a reflection of our city. Everything was upside down. It felt nice to be somewhere different. When we looked into the waterlogged windows, we saw our life playing back at us in reverse. For some reason we needed to see it all again. There was love, and so many mistakes.

I saw the time when I was a toddler and Dad tripped while carrying me down the stairs. I grabbed the banister and that's what saved us from a perilous fall. We looked like a clothesline hanging from a cliff.

We must have been a mirror image of that moment as we made our way up toward the surface of the water. I'm a bad swimmer so Dad pulled me by the arm. I rested my head on his shoulder like I did when I was a baby. The warmth was the same. Then, we got in the car and went home.

Drive

I still don't drive.

She and I have a tiny apartment now. We have no tool kit but lots of mugs. There are so many mugs—some hand-painted, some cracked. The cabinet can't close when they're all clean. Our bed is a couch and also a bed. We have friends over and cook elaborate dinners. There are wine stains on the carpet.

She tells a story about how, when she was young, she would dress up as a knight and gallop around her backyard. She had a tin foil helmet and a curtain rod sword. Her eyes get so wide when she tells it. I know her heart must be big enough to love everything. She wanted to save all of the girls from big, scary things. I can picture it so clearly—the curls spilling out of tinfoil. I think I must have been there too. I think I remember it.

I wait for the shoe to drop but it doesn't. Somehow.

I still get nervous. Sometimes I walk into the apartment and wonder how it could be true that I live here. Sometimes, when she is in my arms, I wonder if I can really hold her. I wonder if I am telling the truth. I wonder if I would know if I wasn't.

She drives me. I feel good with her behind the wheel. She sings along to the songs on the radio even though she doesn't know the words. I do too, and so our car is filled with random pitches and false phrases. She bangs her hands on the steering wheel to the beat. The sun spills in through the windows. We get closer to the river and the water glitters and winks. We go over that same bridge. The city looks the same as it did when I was in the car with Dad. I go quiet and watch the buildings get closer. That old rhythm flows back into my head. I lean against the

window and try hard to make out what he said. It's useless. I listen to her again, really listen, not just to the singing but for any noise I might miss.