

When Dad died, we weren't allowed to see the body. It was weird, how we all called him "The body" instead of Dad. I guess when you're dead, that's what you are. It wasn't wrong, I mean, he wasn't *Dad* anymore. He didn't yell at the TV, or read his daily verses, and he sure as hell wasn't picking up the phone. That was a habit Mom hated. It all started when a very angry man called the house over a dozen times. Usually he'd threaten us, occasionally he'd just yell. No matter how many times Mom told him to ignore the call, he'd pick up the phone, foolishly hoping it would be different each time. Around the fourteenth time, the man said he knew my parents had a daughter and that he knew where we lived. After that, dad didn't answer the phone for a month straight and mom had our landline removed entirely. And we all forgot about landline phones and the strange man, and none of us bothered to stop Dad from picking up his mobile.

His funeral was on Sunday, which he would have liked, I think. It was closed casket. Mom said she didn't want me to see, because I was too young, and it wasn't *him* anyways. I was eight. I know I was, because he was here on my birthday. He had cake, and I think he laughed, and he let me stay up later than I was supposed to. We were out on the porch, and he sat in Mom's old rocking chair. I sat in his lap, because I was small then and knew where I fit.

I had seen stars before then, but they're one of those things you have to look at hundreds of times before you really *see* them. That late July night, I remember how it smelled, how it sounded, how it felt. There aren't many memories you remember like that. The steady creak and rock of the wooden chair, the inky black sky, his gravel-like voice competing against bullfrogs and cicadas, it's all still here. There are things you know will be memories before they've finished, before they're gone.

"Boss," he'd say, as if Boss was my name and everyone knew it. "I could bring you down one of those stars." He rocked back and forth again, slower now. "Any one you'd like, birthday girl." I balanced on his knee, gazing back and forth between the sky and his face. He had told me a couple days ago I was getting too big to sit on his lap anymore, but he didn't say it that day. His eyes were big and brown and sad and old. He had dark circles orbiting them, and when I looked at them in photographs, his eyes were more pit than eye. But here, they were full of stars and something farther away than space. "Whichever one you can reach." I answered. He nodded, his sad eyes settled across the night. He spoke in a voice that sounded like it was carrying more than any voice should. "I'll be there soon." He stopped rocking, and he held me tight for what felt like forever.

I imagined him through a window of a rocket ship, waving goodbye to me and and Mom, and I like to think he imagined the same. "You should bring back a star for Mom too." I whispered in his ear, feeling how scratchy his chin was against my cheek. "I'll see what I can hold." he said, smiling again. We sat there for another forever, rocking back and forth. It smelled like bugs, old wet pine, and his birthday cake breath. Sweet and familiar, and so lost.

He tapped his foot; it was time to go. I remember wishing he'd carry me inside, just one more time. "You're getting too old for those things, Boss." He told me. How nice it would've been, to remember being weightless, too. The floor creaked when he stood up, and I knew then this

wouldn't happen again. I held his hand all the way to my bedroom, where he tucked me in. Before he turned off the lights, he smiled his sad smile, and I couldn't see if he had those stars in his eyes, but here is where I remember him clearest. Standing in the doorway, far away, as if I was counting down his lift-off.

"I love you, Boss."

Then, he was gone.

Sometimes, he stays. He reads me a book, and his breath still smells like birthday cake and chocolate ice cream, because that's what he liked. I'd see him watching TV and he'd be angry, but he'd be here, because that's what I liked. The next day, we would do it all over again, and this time, he'd wake me up with the brightest light carried in his own hands. It'd be my own star, and it would have been just in reach. I wouldn't have to remember his voice, because he'd say, "I'm back from space, Boss!" And I'd know it. Then, he'd hold me real tight, and this time, he wouldn't let go.

When Dad died, we weren't allowed to see the body. This way, I could imagine him in a space suit, his big helmet reflecting the stars like his dark eyes. I could see it so clearly, it was one of those things you don't even have to look at once to see it, because you know it. Like how I knew I wouldn't fit in that spaceship, or how I knew he loved me before he said it.

Mom got rid of her old rocking chair, where he last held me under that heavy sky. The last time I was weightless, the last time I knew where I fit. On that porch I stood alone, and there were the stars that seemed much more out of reach when only one person was watching them. There were the bullfrogs and bugs, and the creaky floorboards. I thought of what he might have said.

Nothing. I tried to muster how his voice trailed on in that gruff way. Nothing. I closed my eyes and held my arms across my chest and prayed he'd be here, holding me. Nothing. I dialed up his phone number, and for the first time, he didn't answer.