

I'll tell you how it is.

The land bridge has long since melted from the surface. Time travel is impossible. I am the spitting image of my father and his father before him. Soon, we will be grown and our bones will harden and clench themselves to dust. I cannot see the irony but I am aware that it exists.

Tell me one thing that is not chemistry and tell me that it's love. Tell me there is an elusive something or other that keeps philosophers breathing and searching and turning the wheels of questions and answers that power the engine of the perpetual motion machine. I am in the back seat of a car on the highway and life is a gradually blooming metaphor. Subconscious plans are slowly coming to realization, and I am afraid.

"I want to see you naked." And she smiled warmly and with humorous understanding.

I am lying in the backseat and I am sleeping. Or I am pretending to be asleep and thinking about sleeping. The combined heat of three human bodies rises to the roof and escapes out of tiny cracks in the windows. I cannot sigh although I want to. A cricket calls and hails our lazy surrender to the heat.

We are sleeping alone in the desert with birds and hordes of menacing cacti. We are individuals and we are selfish. A single automobile and its occupants against the world—losing a thousand battles. And every retreat is an attack on something else.

"Would you pass me the goddamn Pepsi please?"

Someone is speaking.

"Wilson! Pepsi!"

I am all too happy to oblige but I cannot muster the energy. I am shocked at the willpower behind the request. It is hot and night time has depressed us. There are no mirages under the moon and they were keeping us alive and full of things to say.

"You are supposed to be sleeping." I say.

"Yeah, well," says Kimsey, and that is enough.

No one is getting any Pepsi. There are dogs out there, wild ones that eat other animals. Where are they now, I wonder? Are they stalking us from around the rocks? Are they pressed against the sand and waiting? They are somewhere, no doubt. And somewhere there are sharks and stingrays and killer whales, tearing the guts away from a belly and gorging on hot blood. A thousand miles away, our bellies remain intact but empty.

There is a sliding vertigo which runs between us and the ground, and lifts us through the country. And now we have slowed or stopped altogether, because the car cannot run without anyone behind the wheel. There is a slithering snake of progress laid out before us and its tail is snapping in defense.

Would two red lights on the outskirts of town stop us? No. A subtle omen of tripped circuits and electricity.

"I'll never get any fucking sleep in this fucking car!"

The automobile: the miracle of the modern age. The navigator. If I die out here I will burn up. I will rise like heat through the cracks in the windows and they will bury tiny beads of sweat. The car will remain.

I exist now through sheer will power alone. The moon is a magnet and I am a loosely formed mass of iron filings.

"Dear Louise. Just slip off your coat and kiss me."

What a ridiculous proposal. And now, stopped at a red light a thousand miles too late, we contemplate our destiny.

"Let's go outside and cut some fucking cactuses," says Kimsey, raising his head. "Let's mess their shit up."

And in moving, we agree. The doors push open and legs stretch out, like tongues tasting the air. We rise to our full height and stretch to the sky. Kimsey takes a long knife out from underneath his seat and examines the edge. He looks nervous. I look over at Louise and we smile. It is much better outside.

"Which Cactus do we kill?" I ask.

"I don't know. There are too many fucking cactuses," says Kimsey, darting his eyes over the forms: black and tall like judges.

"Cacti," says Louise.

"Fuck you," says Kimsey as his eyes lock onto a nearby plant. His hands clench around the handle, and he charges with the blade raised over his head, screaming. He darts at it, kicking up sand; he is a murderous steam engine. The air is tense and I fear for both cactus and Kimsey. He does not slow down. I am surprised and afraid for anyone with such a passionate hatred for cacti. Kimsey is afraid, too.

The knife enters cleanly and down to the hilt, but the sand catches his foot and he slips into the needles. The blade pulls downward.

"Sonofabitch!"

He is bleeding and angry.

He rips the knife loose and stumbles to his feet in a frenzy of stabs and slashes.

"The sonofabitch!" he screams again and tears into the flesh. "The fucker!" And tiny bits of cactus and Kimsey fly through the air.

Louise and I charge at him, half-amused, half-frightened in fascination. I am impressed with his ferocity and also with the dangerous redundancy of a cactus and a knife. I lunge at his waist and the knife flies loose. Kimsey's hands are still flying and bludgeoning the cactus, hard and automatic.

"You sonofabitch," he yells a third time. "Lemme go!"

It suddenly dawns on him that I am attached, and he refocuses his energy on my head. I hold tight and press my face into his stomach.

"Lemme go!"

Louise flies through the air and locks her arms around his chest and arms and squeezes with all her might. Kimsey lets out an agonizing scream of defeat, and then collapses backwards, bleeding from his hands and face.

We lay in the sand and our bodies heave in breathing. Recollection comes in silence. The cactus looms above us, wounded and emotionless. It knows we cannot destroy it. We know it knows, and the knowledge makes us uneasy, so we laugh and sob and dig our feet into the sand, all the while fighting the urge to look back at the horrible, ghastly beast that stalks us through the gaping hole in its chest. It cannot move.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

Reach homeward with sticks and brooms. Dig your claws into the ground and pull yourself forward. Does the destination exist? Approach with cautious optimism. Never stop questioning the ocean, and do not believe it until you see it.

“Sonsofbitches,” Kimsey’s sobbing voice is muffled by his sleeve. “My hands ...”

I know that he is okay and that his hands and face will heal. He knows this too, but he is overwhelmed with angry embarrassment at the incident. I am fine. Something about the ridiculousness of it is not soaking in and I can’t tell what that means. A month ago, we would not have mauled a cactus, but now I see no reason not to. I wonder if I’m crazy, and quickly decide that I am not; neither is Louise. Neither is Kimsey. We are hunters with a fear of game. We are a misguided, modern instinct that is lashing out at shapes and forms, at ideas and plans of action. We are beautiful, stupid, simian, riding a car across the desert, trying to find that artless line—that calculating stroke that is the beach. We’re trying to find out where it ends.

Louise has told me it is lovely and I find it hard not to believe her. She tells me she has seen it and that the ocean there is blue. She speaks of whales and waves and ebbing tides that swallow up the Earth. She says the Ocean’s not for swimming. It’s like a beast you see in zoos. There is allowed a brief flirtation with a giant. She tells me that a million people travel there, and that they wade in to their waists and then scurry back on shore. They feel that that they are quick and that the sea is slow and stumbling. This confidence eludes me.

In confidence I express concern about my future and where it is I’m going. In confidence I kiss her milk white fingertips and smile.

“Our home is far away from here.”

And she said yes.

“Maybe home is on the run.”

I cannot help but think that we are all trying to escape the planet and to find out what it is like to be nothing, to hold ourselves up against the universe and compare. Every car is a primitive rocket and every driver is a terrified

astronaut. I think about this and suddenly things are very serious and very hard to grasp. We are tiny specks of dust and etc. The road is undefined. It is stretched and cracked, and it hates us. We can't help but use it. Even when we're stopped we are running, like a river. In a few hours we will be moving again and we will be laughing and talking and lapping up the pavement.

I cannot think in hours but I've been thinking in moments since the start. A dead dog; a flat tire; four hitchhikers in a row. And sleep is blunt and heavy when it comes, sitting like boulders between days. I have not forgotten mother or the way she tucked me in but I have learned to grow indifferent, to block out any longing I may have had. I sleep alone and with my friends.

She will be sleeping by my shoulder tonight and I'll pretend her breath is conversation. Kimsey sleeps behind the wheel with the keys in the ignition. He is afraid of bandits.

The firm but gentle grip of sleep is wrapped around our eyes. The sky is looming like a zeppelin. Dogs crawl invisibly through the sand amongst the cacti, black and tall like judges.

Come morning we are dead, or close to it. But our heads are cocked like flowers at the sun and we are warm and getting warmer. Our toes are flexing in our shoes.

Her head is resting lightly on my chest and her hands are knit and tucked below her chin. Her back is curved in a splendid arc and her knees are pushed up to her stomach. Her lips are slightly parted and she breathes in tiny, controlled motions of her chest. These graces do not escape her in the desert.

She is strong and patient and her skin radiates with the quality of passive romance.

She is ready for more at any given time. This is an idea I have and it is slippery and beautiful.

She is awake but she is waiting for an indicator to move. I wait and then I fidget on my seat. Almost immediately the car is filled with tiny fidgets and twists of vocal chords. Kimsey, in the front seat, shakes his head dramatically from side to side and sighs. Louise's knees squeeze together and then shift downward. Her hands un-knit and un-tuck themselves and her head lifts briefly from my chest. She turns her face to me and smiles.

Along the road there are patches of dry grass that poke up through the sand, and the landscape is littered with dried up bushes. Skeletons of plants. The horrible cactus has lost its life in the daylight and stands motionless and torn up. Its wounds are stale and bloodless.

Kimsey's shoulders roll up and down and he runs his hands through his hair, pushing it back. He sighs and puts his head down, then with sudden energy, opens his door and steps into outside. My head falls lazily sideways to gaze at my door. I understand that it will not open through power of gazing alone, but it is difficult to care. With careful precision I let my body fall slowly

toward the door, with my arm held out and hand ready. My upper body collides safely on the seat and my hand locks successfully onto the handle of the door. I pull on the handle and push the door and we are free. I lead and Louise is close behind.

The air outside is depressingly similar to the air inside the car. The heat bears down on us and the air is recycled. We are trapped between two ovens. Kimsey stands with his hands on his hips and his head fixed on the road ahead. His eyes squint and stubbornly resist the blinding beams of light from space.

"I figure a few hours from now we'll have a place to stay and get cleaned up," says Kimsey as he shifts his weight onto his right leg.

I don't know how he figures this. I think that maybe he's crazy, after all.

"Yeah," I say.

Louise is looking opposite, down the road the way we have come. She stretches with her arms up high and lets them fall against her sides.

"Not a second to waste, boys," she says, and smiles. "Let's go."

I squint into the distance and cannot disagree. I wander out to the sand to piss.

Kimsey stands a little longer, staring into the distance. His body turns before his head, and he reaches into the car. He takes out his knife and wanders twenty yards from me to relieve himself behind a cactus. Louise is squatting behind the car. In this moment we are almost comfortable. I smile and hum a tune.

"Shut up, dickhead!" yells Kimsey.

I hear Louise begin to hum from behind the car, high and musical.

"Sing it, sister," I say, and button up my pants.

"I'll stab you," says Kimsey, simultaneously walking and buttoning.

"You couldn't stab a fly."

"Stab a fly. Fucking ridiculous."

I laugh and drum on the trunk of the car to warn Louise of our approach. She stands up and I quickly look away. The sun is high up and glaring. She laughs and in a flourish of motion she is ruffling my hair.

"Oh boys," she says. "We're explorers now I think."

I free my head from bondage. "I fear this area has already been discovered."

"Not like this it hasn't, darling." She looks me in the eyes, and then slips in through the door. "The morning is behind us gentlemen." She pats the seat next to her.

There is no time like the present. An awaiting box of moving parts and a firmly planted path constructed almost specifically for it. This equation has a thousand answers. All roads are ultimately circles.

I climb in, "Let us away, driver."

Kimsey tips his brow like a hat and plants himself behind the wheel. "Lock your doors, fuckers."

The car pulls onto the road and the wheels are spinning soundly. The scenery watches us in disgust. We're leaving, we seem to say. And it says: *No, we don't believe you, we'll burn you to the ground.* I say: Try it you buzzards, you cacti, you countless grains of sand. Prove to me that you're so big.

And it does and continues to do so for hours and hours.

Roll down the windows and let the air in. Pull your shirt away from your sticky skin and breathe. Every 10 seconds we relapse into depression. The sun is following relentlessly and we fly along the road. Kimsey steers lazily and his eyes are submissive. You can almost see the rays that fire off the distance and then work across his retinas.

There is nothing to leave behind and for a long time there is nowhere to go. And though we push forward, the desert is elastic, pulling on all sides.

"I say if you're going to do it, just do it," said Kimsey, days ago. And now there is a radio and the floating notes from space. There's a horn and there's the slow rhythmic sound of a cymbal and a snare. The lonely crooning of a woman. She babies her vocal chords and pitches just above the bass. This is carried out and lost amongst the sand. It reverberates in snail shells and birds skulls until it fades from tiny ears. Louise reads Jane Austen. She smiles warmly and with humorous understanding.

The sun. The Methuselah of the buzzards.

"I've never been afraid of nothing," I say. "Now I'm terrified."

The scene remains the same.

If we were walking we'd be dead. I'm sure of it. Maybe not right now, but sometime in the night we'd be swallowed by the ground, spit out and then buried by the wind.

I slide back against the seat and stretch my legs against the seat in front of me. Louise is asleep with her book against her chest.

Kimsey turns around, sees her, and turns down the radio.

"What a baby," he says, and sets his eyes onto the road.

I look at her and agree happily. She is young, radiant. If she can stay asleep into the night, we'll be a lighthouse. A sister of the sun. We'll be a spotlight on the sand, casting shadows over rocks. An almost solid wall of light, fortified and well constructed. The Maginot.

I smile and close my eyes. "She'll die before she lets us stop." And I feel like crying.

Kimsey's gaze is pointed like a compass down the straight and narrow stretch of road. He is noble now, and dignified. He is the diplomat, our ambassador to the whirling desert, running flat beneath our heels. He squints and cups his hand above his eyes. There are scratches across his cheek and forehead. I notice now his hands are minced and pale.

The desert stretches on all sides. Kimsey plants us here, there, and we hover in flux and change. And now we breathe and pump our hearts and lumber. The car sputters, slows, then levels off.

"God damn it," says Kimsey, and shakes his head with wild eyes. "Oh God damn this car if I get eaten by a vulture."

Having long ago accepted this outcome, I am content.

"Do you want me to drive?" I ask.

"What the hell is that going to do?" says Kimsey rhetorically.

I laugh and say I don't know.

I can see Louise's eyes blooming in the corner. She stretches against the door and seat.

"Gentlemen, are we alive?"

"Barely. Go back to sleep. There are bandits."

"Oh are there?"

"Don't look. They have eyes for your body and the gold buttons on your coat."

She turns and smiles. "Have they surrounded our convoy?"

"Yes," I say. "It won't be long now."

"Will you two shut up?" Kimsey is irate.

"They are saying to themselves 'There is money to be made' and they are closing in on horseback."

Outside the air is empty and the desert is devoid of bandits. There is an unconscious pressure between Kimsey's foot and the gas pedal. The line has been blurred between bandits imagined and real. There is something to escape.

"Escape, Kimsey. Go!"

There is stubborn refusal. "I'll escape when I'm dead."

He's afraid to play along because he thinks he might go crazy. The car is in defiant control. There is an electric will to speed away. We drop it, but the invisible bandits drive on. They get closer and closer but they never attack.

"You guys won't think it's so funny when they beat you bloody in your sleep."

There will be at least a mild, underlying humour. The joke that comes with everything is always outside laughing in. What's funny: an intellectual guffaw taken down and then chuckled at. If I die inside this car, if bandits cut my throat, I will bleed to death for nothing.

Kimsey laughs softly. "Fucking ridiculous."

Louise removes herself from conversation, in that subtle way she always manages, and tilts her head toward one of the windows that has occupied so much of our time. She is smiling seriously. She is in a green T-shirt, with the words *ad astra* printed across the chest, and a black skirt which I envy for its ventilating appeal. Her eyes are a magnificent blue.

She is a beacon of possibilities. One: she is not where she wants to be. Two: she is lost and confused. Three (most likely): she loves us both and is anxious to see how it ends. We are a plummet through the landscape.

The seat next to Kimsey has a spring that pierces the leather and stands erect and vicious, waiting to taste the blood of whoever lets it slip their mind

first. We have managed to out smart it thus far, but I wonder how much longer it can wait before it comes at us in our sleep. Kimsey seems worried, too.

"I think we'll drive into the night." I say, half stating and half asking.

Kimsey seems to agree and he nods vaguely.

All around us there are things. I had grown into the assumption that the desert was empty, but by the road it is a concentrated mass of objects. Cacti and bushes and strange formations of rocks are flying by the windows. What is growing in the desert and sapping up the dunes? I am developing an obsessive fascination. Louise stares calmly out the window.

"Hey, wake up," I say as I shake her shoulder.

Her eyes follow her head toward my face.

"Awake," she says.

"That's the spirit."

She could sleep if she wanted to but that blue flicker of trouble makes me think we could all die. There is still that light hum, the pressure between foot and pedal. Time never quite escapes me but races over my head. There is nothing to say we are escaping it; in fact evidence suggests that we never will. Mute boredom becomes the generator of adventure.

And so we drive for hours and hours more and our thoughts are particular and focused.

Escape.

We climb and we climb and the desert extends itself like a ladder. We drive and drive like an ant in pancake batter and when the sun rises again it bears down and presses itself against the very fabric of time and tries to push itself through the car and devour us in a furious hunger. The insatiable beasts track us from behind dunes of sand and they pause to stare us down and they wait and run and jump and lick their slack, brooding lips and suck their teeth clean of blood.

Night comes again; we are awake and terrified. The long haul of hypnosis. We have become paranoid. Around corners there are slender shadows, and from shadows there are whispers and grinding teeth. From above there are the stars and they are watchmen for the sun, like a million piercing, stinging eyes. From here the stars are cold. Temperature is relative. Louise's shirt is dark and unreadable.

We become mice and do as mice do. We drive slowly and we are cautious of eyes in the dark. The headlights are a charade that will not trick these things for long.

Pulling to the side of the road and killing the ignition, Kimsey sighs and relaxes his arms. The hum between foot and pedal pitches and then fizzles out. We have stopped and we're exhausted.

It's not completely dark yet. The sun fights red against the horizon, quivering in anger, screaming in high-pitched dog whistle rage. If the buzzards circle the sky, they are naked now. And hungry. I pull my eyes closed.

We sit there for a bit, keys in the ignition. Kimsey rests his head back on the seat. Louise looks up at the ceiling of the automobile, leans back then forward again to stroke Kimsey's dark, oily hair behind his ears. His eyes close tightly and he begins to cry.

Now, suddenly, there is no evaporation. The air is wet and Kimsey, the freight train, the meat club, the hammer, is sobbing lightly with waning reserve. The full-on night is melting down and I must seem afraid. Louise's hands hold back his hair and she speaks to him from his right side.

"Oh darling," she says, her lips soft, "Oh darling, we're nearly there."

Kimsey bellows: "Nearly where?"

Nearly where? The Ocean? San Francisco? Some tiny town outside the Mojave, pressed up against the sea and eroding gently into sand? Where can we possibly be near, when what we need is distance? Like the dog running through the forest, we can only go half way in before running out, before coming back from the opposite direction to the start, intersecting with ourselves.

"The sea Kimsey, the sea," says Louise resolutely, as if making a point.

But what sea, Louise? The sea that taunts us? The sea that is less importantly water than it is not land? The sea that is a giant mass pulled and shifted by the moon and draped over the beach like a blanket?

She looked back. "Maybe I'll never marry you, but we'll get to a place where it will be possible." She looked to Kimsey and back again. "Could you give us a minute or two?"

"Sure."

I nod as nicely as I can and I step out into the dark, under the moon. Inside the car I can hear sobbing and whispering, hushed condolences. Kimsey has been driving for a long time, and there is only so much a body can take. I know that Louise can calm him down, as much as I know that Kimsey will do all that he can to get us wherever it is that we're going. What I can't fathom is an ending. I can't see satisfaction, only the gradual receding of expectation. That might almost be as good, but it would crush Louise and it would bury Kimsey.

There is nothing more to do, I suppose, but to keep going. There are dogs, yes. And there are buzzards and cacti, and there is the long trail behind us and the immense circling space above our heads and the wide open palm of the desert. But where there is no escape, there is strength in stability. There are ways to flex our limbs, to hold the space in our own palms, and to think.

A vulture, the first one I've seen, swoops in and lands next to the road. It is every bit as ugly as I imagined. But it is small, and although I am small too, I am fearless. I smile, and up in the sky a grey cloud crosses over the moon.

Inside the car, Louise flicks on the overhead light and gestures at me. I squint my eyes. I saunter over to the car and then I open the door and enter.

"I love you."

Somewhere, a dog howls.