

Constellations

September 7th. From the Super 8 Motel, 2 Gateway Drive, Collinsville, Illinois 62234

Tilt your ears up. Can you hear it? *A constellation*. Imagine the strings of sound, moments and points of connection. Now can you hear it? *Pssshhhhhh*. Stars screaming. The sound of a constellation grabbed out of the sky and thrust into water. That's how my family ended, you know. Some of the warmth still surrounds me, but it's nothing like the *Phhhhhpop!crrrpop!* it was before. No, now it's just me floating in a dark, tepid pool. I think of the old me, the happy me, before Elsie was no longer my wife. And even when she was she wasn't. March 15 I was telling Rose a bedtime story. But you only need a couple weeks to change. By March 29th Elsie had turned her against me. Ah. Well. The sounds, I remember the sounds, were real. *Fast-wet-clicks* before—

Tell me a story.

Fast

It's Rose's sixth birthday. March 29th. I wake up to the *Beep*Beep*Beep* of my alarm. 7 AM. "Go get the cake", Elsie gently reminds me. I roll out of tangled blue bedsheets, put on some pants, and I'm out the door. Cruising through STOP signs on the way to Cott's Bakery (the one Hopkins Crossroad), I hope they have a pink one with sparkles. It would match Rose's favorite dress. *Ding!* sings the little doorbell.

"Goodmorning!"

"Morning. I'm looking for one of your princess birthday cakes. A pink one with lots of sparkles."

"Sure, we have several right over—oh! I'm sorry, I forgot we just ran out of stock on those a couple days ago..."

I feel bad for the saleswoman. Her sweetheart body creases and sinks with apology as she says, "I'm sorry, Sir. Is there anything else I can get you?"

"No, I'm fine. Thanks."

I decide on a chocolate one instead, covered in fat, blue flowers. Vanilla inside, it's the best I can do. I figure I can pick up some wands from the Dollar Store, along with the balloons, and stick them in the cake later. Besides, kids love flowers, right?

I step through the front door, arms loaded with bags, and the first thing I hear is, "Hey. Did you get the cake?"

“Yeah,” I say, walking towards the kitchen. Jesus, feels like 100 degrees inside this house. Once I set the bags down, she opens the glossy cake box lid and peers inside. “They were out of princess cakes, but I picked the prettiest one I could find.”

“It’s one of the only things she asked for today,” Elsie says softly.

“Well, they ran out.” I wonder if Rose will be angry at me. Why do women get so angry anyway? The star wands will cheer her up. Think I’ll be alright.

Annoyance flashes across her face for a moment. Elsie examines the cake once more before closing the lid. “Okay, well it should taste good in any case.” She looks up past my shoulder. “We don’t have much time before they start coming. Can you vacuum the floor? Oh, and Ethan? Make sure all the gifts are wrapped- they’re in the closet.” Grabbing the balloons, she maneuvers behind the kitchen table and out the porch door. Reminds me of the hospital, all those newborn heads bouncing around.

The doorbell starts *ringingining* at noon.

“Honey can you—” Elsie starts, calling from the porch.

“Mmph,” I respond, and shove my head deep in the pantry. Where did those paper napkins and plates go? Elsie comes out and bustles to the door, hustling kids to the backyard. “Would you like a bear, a bumblebee, or a flower today?” I hear drift in from outside.

Well, a long time ago

1 PM, and I’m in the kitchen, watching Elsie smoosh six candles into a melting cake. Rose and her friends are seated around a large round table, covered in a pink tablecloth. They laugh as one, black and brown ponytails bobbing up and down like little, twittering birds. Elsie finishes pushing candles into the spongy cake and takes out the cutting board, slicing up strawberries, blueberries, and blackberries. Juice drips down the counter. *Shink Shink Shink*.

“Dad, I want cake!” Rose yells from outside.

“Can you get out the forks?” Elsie asks.

I rise out of my seat. Woah. The room is shifting. Everything is either very small or very **large**.

we were all just particles.

“Dad!”

“Ethan...”

I stagger towards the cupboard instead, grab the Advil and gulp down five straightaway. Lack of sleep? Still tired from Thursday night. Should have just gone home. Elsie marches impatiently past me with the cake.

“Never mind, I’ll do it,” she huffs on her way out the porch door.

"I'll be out in a minute," I say, leaning against the counter. My eyes rest on the Dollar Store bag. Blue, star topped wands poke out the sides. The wands. I close my eyes. We forgot. I just wanted her to feel like a Princess.

Wet

It's Rose's 6th birthday. *Beep*Beep*Beep*. "Go get the cake," says Elsie. I haul my ass out to the car and drive, at the crack of dawn mind you, all the way to Cottingham's Bakery. *Ding!* What's a particle?

"Goodmorning!"

"Morning. I'm looking for one of your princess birthday cakes. A pink one with lots of sparkles."

"Sure, we have several right over—oh! I'm sorry, I forgot we just ran out of stock on those a couple days ago..." The saleswoman blinks her blue-shadowed eyes at me. "I'm sorry, Sir. Is there anything else I can get you?" she whines.

God, I hate incompetence. Am I like that?

"No, I'm fine. Thanks."

I wasn't about to drive to all the bakeries across town, so I take a chocolate one, knowing Elsie will probably throw a fit. Besides, the cake has flowers on it. Kids love that shit, right? Damn. I still have to pick up the balloons. Maybe if I buy some wands Her Highness will forgive me for the cake.

I'm not even through the front door before Elsie's in my face, nagging me.

"Hey. Did you get the cake?"

"Yeah," I say. Must be 101 degrees inside the house. I speed past her and into the kitchen. Not easy carrying three bags, but does she ask to help? She claws at the bags until she finds the cake box. She opens the lid and peers inside. "They were out of princess cakes, but I picked the prettiest one I could find."

"It's one of the only things she asked for today," Elsie snaps. I can practically hear her thoughts: "He should have called and ordered the cake ahead of time." Not my fault. You'd guess they'd be better prepared. Hundreds of little girls in the neighborhood.

"Well, they ran out." Will Rose blame me? I told her last night I was going to buy the best one. No. No. No. No. It was Elsie. Not me. Not my fault. Love her so much. At least *I* always tell her so. Elsie's not the...no. How can she be? I'm the one out working all day. Turn my attention back to Elsie's face. Ha! I smile at her eye. Twitching. Good.

She closes the lid and says, "Okay, well it should taste good in any case." Why wouldn't it? Wait, what flavor did Rose want? I glance at Elsie. Not like she knows either. "We don't have much time before they start coming. Can you vacuum the

floor? Oh, and Ethan? Make sure all the gifts are wrapped- they're in the closet." I want to SCREAM. Why is she always—that's what she wants. Dust.

Later. I have a SPLIT-ING headache. Must be catching a cold. *Ringinging* goes my head.

"Honey can you—" Elsie starts, calling from the porch.

"Mmph," I respond, and shove my head deep in the pantry. Go away. Goawaygoawaygoaway. "Would you like a bear, a bumblebee, or a flower today?" drifts in from outside.

Now I'm in the kitchen. Fingers are swelled and squished together with sweat. Elsie's cutting the fruit *chop chop bam wham* and the kids are screaming bloody *Shink* murder *Shink* outside *Shink*.

"Dad, I want cake!"

"Cake! Cake! Cake!" Little points of...

Crush crack goes the red Advil between my teeth, salvia drips. "Can you get out the forks?" Leaves, with a smart *clack-twist-twirl*. She forgot the wands. I take one out of the bag. Glimmers faintly, forking beams of light. I lean over the bowl of fruit. stuff.

"Dad!"

"Ethan..."

"Here are some stars for you," I hum. *Snap*. One for her, The Good Witch of the South. *Tink* chimes the bell. *Tink* repeat the points. stardust.

Clicks

*Beep*Beep*Beep*. Day starts with a push. wife warms up with "GO GET THE CAKE." dashing to Cottingley's bakery. *Ding!*

"Goodmorning!"

"Morning. I'm looking for one of your princess birthday cakes. a pink one with lots of sparkles." Floating around

"Sure, we have several right over—Oh! I'm sorry, I forgot we just ran out of stock on those a couple days ago..."

Afraid. That's how Rose sees me. I know that's how she thinks of me. Will Rose become distant? They say...teenagers. No, not there yet. Here. colliding

blinkblinkblink. "I'm sorry Sir Is there anything else I can get you?" Great customer service. What? In a rush to get back to your wonderful, busy life? Sure you have a boyfriend and everything. Safe.

"No, I'm fine. Thanks."

I gotta go star picking. until

Back. 102 degrees.

“Hey. Did you get the cake?” Elsie says, already in the kitchen with Rose. Rose is still in her Ariel nightgown.

“Yeah,” I say, looking at Rose. Knew it. She’s been talking to her about me, woke her up just to do it. “They were out of princess cakes, but I picked the prettiest one I could find.”

“It’s one of the only things she asked for today” Elsie says. She bends down and beckons to Rose. Elsie hugs her. They separate, both peering into the cake box. Do they have a plan? They want to get away from me. Proof. Poof. I know it.

“Well, they ran out.” Can’t watch this. She knew I wouldn’t say anything. Not on Rose’s birthday. But she has. Influenced the girl. A mother’s love.

“Okay, well it should taste good in any case.” Yes, winning does, doesn’t it? “We don’t have much time before they start coming. Can you vacuum the floor? Oh, and Ethan? Make sure all the gifts are wrapped- they’re in the closet.” They leave me, go outside. I can hear them laughing *jingle jangle. Ringingining.*

“Honey can you—”

“Would you like a bear, a bumblebee, or a flower today?”

kitchen. *chop chop bam wham. Shink Shink Shink.*

“Dad, I want cake!”

“Cake! Cake! Cake!”

Crush crack.

“Can you get out the forks?”

“Dad!”

“Ethan...”

Snap. Tink. Tink. hot. dusty. fairy dust? happy birthday, I made you a bowl of stars. Have you ever heard a star’s birth? Hotter and hotter. Denser and denser. And then—

SHHWHOOOP!

And then?

And then?

It's late. I'll tell you the rest tomorrow night.

Promise?

Promise. Love you. Goodnight.

Dad?

Yes, Rose?

What happens when you swallow a star?