

How to Find a Three-Legged Dog

My father died yesterday. I haven't cried yet.

I'm breathing and my clock is ticking. It's pink and I think of how I hate the color. My blanket is covering me and I'm lying in bed. My toes are cold.

There's catastrophe in the kitchen. The pots are banging; my mother's doing. The room I'm in is dark. I can feel something like morning pressing on my fingertips, and I wonder what first enabled me to breathe. I have to pee but I stay horizontal with my eyes closed. I'm awake but I'm not. I'm drifting in and out of suspended thoughts that never seem to stay or develop in my head. My limbs are heavy and I don't want to move. I'm all over the place, dismembered, but sticking together. I wonder how God is doing.

He cleans his kitchen, I know, just like my mom. Everyone else leaves dishes and plates, but faithfully, he loads the dishwasher. He doesn't complain and it bothers me a bit. He's a silent type with thick arms and gruff voice. He moves as if he's made of molasses, and I'm quite sure he's a mute. What kind of god would God be if he had to speak to let you know how he's feeling?

I move my left foot a little. I can hear a cabinet door bang shut as my big toes edge out for a stretch. My chest rises slowly and sporadically. I'm terribly irresponsible, but I'll let myself think that I'm not. The clock ticks away somewhere in front of me. It's a lovely sound.

I suppose you're assuming it's morning. I suppose you assume I'm tired. But you're wrong, terribly deceived by your own preconceived notions. On the contraire, it's six o'clock on a Friday night and I'm wide awake and drifting. The midnight train is coming soon, but it won't slow its brakes as it recklessly roars by my bed. The conductor knows me a little better than that. My breath spills over the golden comforter; it has left me and I decide to hold my breath, thinking of what it would be like to never breathe again, yet walk on earth, creating noise with all my silence.

Maybe I would become a mute like God. He seems to have all his pegs in a row, or so my priest says. God is good. God is great. Hallowed be Thy Name. If I die before I wake.

If god does exist, he must be a stallion amongst ponies. They're penned in, and when he runs, everyone stops to watch. His mane streams in the wind he creates, and his coat shines sleeker than Black Beauty's. I can see him with his god sized hooves smashing through a creaky wooden fence. Each time he connects with the ground the earth celebrates with a thunderous quiver. The ponies stupidly neigh and follow, follow, follow. Something grand. Something great. I pray the lord my soul to take.

I finally need to gasp air. My lungs are burning and I'm not sure if I like the feeling. My mouth tastes unnervingly close to death.

I might come off as depressing sometimes, talking about death the way I do, but I'm really quite a happy person. I've never struggled with anything quite so great as chronic seasonal disorder or mild bipolar anxiety, although the people who see me in parks and churches often are thinking (I see can it in their nervous glance) that I am slightly unhinged, the local deranged almost-making-it-but-not-quite-she-might-just-walk-into-a-bank-and-kill-five-people-or-find-her-hanging-from-the-oak-tree-in-the-park-one-day kind of person. It gives me a small sprig of ecstasy to know this just by reading their character. Sometimes I'll laugh in church just thinking about it.

The problem with laughing in church is that my town thinks it is smaller than it really is. It's a fricking city for crying out loud, but everyone will still know you as 'sinner' if you go for an ice cream at the Dippy Cone. The priest will even call you out on it. The other day, mine came up to me and asked me if I would like to go to confession. For what? Laughing in church? Does Jesus get pissed about this kind of thing? I mean, are priests even supposed to do that? Ask someone for their sins? If he really wants them, I suppose I could put them in an extra large fed-ex box with a red bow and send them to him for Easter.

I think priests and people are part of the reason I took to Emily Dickenson and numbers. Emily doesn't ask you for your sins, and numbers certainly don't stare when you laugh in church. The other thing I like about Emily is that she mourns, you can tell, her insanity, because although she is insane and realizes it, she keeps coming back to it like a well developed imaginary friend.

"Hello, Insanity, and how are you today?"

“Fine, thank you, and completely a figment of your ingenious imagination.”

“Oh, Insanity. You’re too kind.”

(Emily shivers and waits for the doorbell to ring.)

I find Emily much like math. Often I’ll do a formula, and when I come to the answer, I discovered I really learned nothing at all except what I knew in the first place. “X” was going to equal something that meant nothing to me. I knew that. Emily knew that she would wait and wait and inevitably find nothing of any consequence or meaning. It’s all part of a grand game in which we’re all convincing ourselves that we truly are sane. That’s the insanity of it all. We sit around and do numbers and write poems, but it is just paper and pen, paper and pen. Just like flesh and blood and mountain and sky. One in the same, we all will die.

I suppose my father understood this better than the rest of us.

I’m still lying in bed when I start to wonder if he felt much at all in the moment of his death.

There’s no warning as my mom softly pushes open the door.

“It’s a bit early for bed, don’t you think, dear?”

She says it with a worried look on her face, and I picture her wringing a washcloth in her hands. She looks at me expectantly, but I don’t answer her. I’m already somewhere else.

I poke an arm out of my warm haven and wave it at her. She waits a moment, hesitates, and then turns and leaves the room. I’m a shitty daughter.

In a perfect world I suppose I wouldn’t be here. Not in this place, this moment, ripping away breath from something as sweet and alive and persevering as this earth. None of us would, really. We’re just parasites and we suck the marrow from our host. If she tires soon enough, which I’m convinced she will, she will close off her bounteous fields and adapt, while we die long, slow deaths, thirsty and calling out, “God save the king.” My father wasn’t screaming “God save the king,” but then again, he wasn’t screaming much of anything. He didn’t have time, not even for one of his favorite boozed up curse words.

My father used to curse when he was drunk. He would say Shit and Bastard and Jesus Christ, all the while smiling at you with the most earnest and heartfelt pitifully lopsided grin.

Jesus Christ was the best, due to the fact that the unobtrusive lisp he had when sober was dominant and joy inducing after a pint or two.

“Jesuth Chrith, I only need a push!”

He had chuckled when he said that, trying to look me straight in the eyes wearing his goofy sloshed up smile that revealed only his upper teeth. This particular night of Jesuth Chrith happened about four years ago, back when I was still in high school and my dad would come to my basketball games after working twelve straight hours in the shipyard. This night, however, my dad had come home after golfing. My mom and the kids were gone visiting relatives in Wisconsin. It was twelve in the morning. It could only mean one thing.

“Juth a push!”

The note at the end of “push” zinged up to the octave of a woman. It was a happy ‘push’ for a happy lush. My dad was referring to his truck he had backed into the ditch outside our house. The headlights were cutting straight through the black night, lighting up the anchor painted on our mailbox.

“I think you’re going to need more than a push, you silly bastard.”

And this was love. My dad laughed and I called my Uncle Toby to haul him out of the ditch. My dad and I finished the night off by eating popcorn and watching the Packers on SportsCenter.

The next morning I asked my dad about Jesuth Chrith, and he would reply with, “What? I only wanted some cheese and rice!”

Right on cue, Dad, right on cue.

But it’s 2004, I’m in college, and nobody I know says Jesuth Chrith anymore. All people ever say is ‘Jesus Christ’ or ‘god’ with a capital ‘g’ and they’re usually not drunk.

I’ve often thought that people who believe in God with a capital ‘g’ don’t believe in much at all. Shouldn’t god be God whether GOD is god or God? Why does their god have to be God? Isn’t he both god and God if god is everything and everywhere? Does god really wag a finger down from heaven and shake a mighty head saying, “Inferiors! I Am. Don’t make me smite you... now capitalize my ‘g’!”

I prefer to think of god, GOD, and God as a bit classier and somewhat more abstruse than that. But I could be wrong.

I like to entertain the idea that perhaps I'm wrong about everything. That's why I sometimes let people think I am an atheist. I'm really a Catholic with a small heart. But they can think what they want. Some would call my decisions of sporadic portrayal unchristian, unworthy, sinful, prideful, slanderous, perfidious, and whatever big words they can throw in a long chain of synonyms before running out of breath. Usually they'll just draw another breath and continue on, more content than even they know. I don't listen. But I let them think I am.

Truly, I'm thinking about how nice it would be to stitch a zipper on their lips and 'zoop!' up it goes.

Sometimes it is funny to listen, however. Just the other day, a skinny girl in our school called me an oxymoronal hypocritic. She said Mother Mary was for pagans. She said saints were for blasphemers. She said I should go back to the bible and learn what faith was really about.

I asked her if she knew the color of Jesus' mustache.

She left, so she never found out the answer.

The answer is, of course, that he had a dark mustache and full beard. He was from the Middle East, so we should all recognize that he was a pretty hairy guy. I could be wrong. He could have been albino. I think one of the prophets would have mentioned that, though. But I could be wrong. Little skinny could be wrong. Doesn't she know that it is all the same and belief is belief and we really believe nothing at all?

Maybe we're all wrong. But that would have to make somebody right.

That's why I let people think I'm an atheist or a Wiccan or a Buddhist. I'm both the weakest and the strongest believer they'll ever come across. It's okay for them to imagine me pasting twigs to my body and dancing with the trees as I become one with nature. It's not them I have to prove anything to. Besides, if I spoke and they listened, they wouldn't be able to wrap their heads around the fact that nothing they say or I do matters, so what's in the point in saying anything at all. They would just keep talking. I find that Christians do that quite a bit. Talk

and talk. It's like being trapped in a room that has a dripping faucet with a broken handle, and it's just you and the damn faucet.

What's even better is when the Christian reveals their identity. I always think it funny when Christians call themselves Christians. Christians. Christ. Christians. Christ. They are most certainly not the same. I don't recall Jesus beating me over the head with a book.

Then again, I never knew the man.

But I'm sure he wouldn't beat anybody.

That's what's so funny about this place. The world, I mean. People think they got it down to just the way it's supposed to be. So they flick their wrist and start this tiny movement and before you know it, they have a congregation full of mindless servants. They'll even start fires and riots in the name of the one who wouldn't even cry out as flesh was torn from his limbs. If you ask me, Jesus doesn't care about how many mighty it takes to tear down the towers of disbelief. He cares about the difference between Jesus Christ and Jesuth Chrith. Symbolically speaking of course, because I'm sure god couldn't be prejudice against one with a lisp.

I don't think what I think is so terrible. Apparently, I'm the only one. When I said that Jesus could be a mute albino with hooves and a flowing mane, my teacher sent me out of class. I didn't know that could still happen in college. We were talking about misconception in the Bible during my theology class, and I mentioned that I thought many people misinterpreted the color of Jesus. My teacher asked me what I meant and I explained my very serious belief to her.

"It's perfectly legitmate." I was sincere. Frank. Jim. George.

"It's not legitmate if you're theologically and mentally sound."

"Show me where in the Bible it says Jesus couldn't possibly have had hooves."

After that she made me leave the classroom. I'm still not sure why, and I never did get to see the verse in the Bible declaring that Jesus denied with all conviction and authority that his feet never could and never would potentially be hooved or albino.

I think the truly terrible things are what I learned when I got back to my room. I went online and read about how a lady microwaved her baby, and how she said, "If I wouldn't have been drunk, it would have never happened."

That made me sick to my stomach, so I turned on the t.v. and heard about a four year old girl who died because her father raped her.

I picked up a magazine and read about a teenage boy who took an automatic and blew his brains out on the front porch of his house.

I traded it for the newspaper and read about a family who kidnapped a black woman and tortured her for seven days before she was found.

There were turf wars in the west, genocide in the east, AIDS in Africa, suppression and oppression and neglect and abuse and rinse and reuse, rinse and reuse.

It was somewhat of an uplifting day.

My mom had called the same day and I told her I didn't want to talk. She talked anyway. She said that Bobby was getting big and Gretchen was getting moody. Would I like to talk to them? They missed me around the house. She asked if I wanted her to send me cookies, but I just pretended like I hung up. I was really there, but I let her think I wasn't. It broke my heart a little, how her throat clicked before the line, but at least this way, she'll never feel sad about the fact that I'm gone.

As of right now, however, I'm very much here, and when I say here, I mean at home. I haven't been at school for exactly one day now, and I'm sure the campus is rather lonely without my sound theories lurking through the halls. My absence was probably soon in coming anyway, after my albino Jesus episode. It was only about a week ago, and already, rumor had it that my distressed teacher went to the dean talking about strait jackets and what not. I'd like to offer the poor lady a warm cup of tea to soothe her nerves.

Either way, it's sort of nice to be home, even if it is because my dad is dead. Most of my family is here, and it's strangely wonderful to be bothered by them again.

Langston has a special talent for grinding my gears. He's both my brother and an alcoholic by way of hi-my-name-is-Langston-I've-been-sober-for-one-day-and-I'm-only-here-because-I-was-unlucky-enough-to-get-caught. (Cue small group applause. He sits back down.) Twenty-two with a driving-under-the-influence notched in his belt, he's going strong for hard swallows of Morgan, Jack, Jim, and Grace. I've never known him to be without a malfunctioning

mini-screwdriver in his pocket, a condom in his wallet, or the guilt of my cousin's suicide on his shoulders. Sometimes he wears really cheesy sunglasses. At night.

My other brother is in the military, and he hasn't made it home yet. California Jordan. He has red hair, freckles, and a sense of humor bordering on annoying. He used to have bad acne, but that cleared up with the Navy. My most vivid memory of him involves the time he made me pee on the floor outside of the bathroom. He locked me out and was making a noise that sounded like water dripping. I couldn't hold it in so I let it go. To get revenge, I cleaned it up with his toothbrush.

I was eleven then.

I'm twenty now and for some reason, that makes my mom nervous in an affectionate way. I can't quite figure out why. It could be my quiet disposition to quiet, or that fact that when I do talk, I say questionable things in a British accent, like, "Query, have we any granolas left?" It could be because I want to marry my cat, or the fact that I fart at the dinner table and don't say "Excuse me from the table" when I leave.

I know it's not polite to pass gas at the eating table, but if you knew my grandpa you would understand. He's 80 years old. He will fart anywhere. Donut Connection, Piano Recital, Valedictorian Speech At My Graduation, The Room Of A Dying Cancer Patient – it doesn't matter. He's always been obsessed with gas. He even has what I call the "Grandpa Jingle". I thought all grandpas sang it until I realized my grandpa was unique, or what psych ward attendants call "mentally unstable". The first time we visited my grandparents, I was four and these are the remnants of my memory:

*There was an old lady who lived by the sea,
Out of her rear grew a crabapple tree,
All of the sailors would buy her fruit,
Because it grew out of her Rooty-toot-toot!*

That and "pull my finger!" I suppose it's really just one of the staples to growing up. Learning what really happens when you pull a wrinkly old finger. I learned fast and young. That's when they get you.

Before I understood my grandpa and myself, I often used to wonder where I fit into my family. It's full of dirty sailors and I just like poems. Poems and boys. My dad is (or was) a seaman, along with the rest of my family. After being on the boat, he and my brothers would come home in greased up Levi's with genuine holes in them, back when it was embarrassing to have dirty, holy jeans. Their hands were calloused and stained in the creases with dark, thick engine oil. I would watch them wash their hands. They needed to use Dawn and Brillo pads to work out the labor. We had a sink in our entry way that my mother had specifically designated for workman hand-washing. I remember the way the Dawn slid around on their hands, and how the Brillo pads roughed their calluses away into fresh, pink skin. My father and brothers never made a sound, even if they rubbed too hard and started bleeding. I would wince and even cry out, but they would just scrub their hands, kick off steel-toed boots, and make for the table like lions at a lamb, still with grease on their face, and smudged hats on head.

My father and brothers had always seemed fierce to me, and I remember how excited I would get when my brother's used to play with me. I knew I was in trouble when Jordan unleashed "THE BEAAAAAR!" and he would roar in a grizzly voice. I would run and giggle and he would tackle me and tickle. How I had once begged for mercy.

Langston and I on the other hand had played games like milk machine and inchworm. Milk machine involved us lying on our backs and pressing the soles of our feet together, and pushing our legs in opposite directions. He pushed forward with his right; I pushed back with my left. We tried to get them going as fast as we could while holding our breath before we ran out of air. Inchworm involved vacuum sealing our bodies in separate sleeping bags, and seeing who could inch their bodies the fastest to the finish line, which was often our kitchen.

Now all he wants to do is drink with me.

In all honesty, I don't care much for booze. I like poems and boys. Combining the three isn't particularly ideal. I once really liked this boy who was more a man, I suppose, considering he was twenty-four. I was nineteen and sure I was desperately in love. I slammed a few too many one night and I don't remember much except that I never want to speak to Garrett again. Then I wrote poems about it.

Nobody in my family really cares too much for poetry. I think my mother could, but she's got more to worry about than she can count on one hand. She doesn't have time for sobby cryptographs like Shakespeare and Eliot and Dickenson and Poe. When you have real worries, you don't need to read about someone else's.

I know my dad never gave two shits for poetry either. He was always more concerned with business and golf, and who really knew what my dad thought after all. The man never talked unless liquor loosened his tongue. I mean, he tried when he was sober; he just wasn't loquacious at all. He was more silent than a stone bridge at midday noon and just as sturdy. He didn't often say it, but I knew he loved me, up until the final clash of metals and breath of air. It's strange how the feeling emanates, even now, and all my father's goodness radiates into me. I wish we would have talked more, though. I just found out two weeks ago on a visit to home that he didn't believe in God. I'm twenty. It was the first real talk we'd ever had and it was at a bar. I ordered a kiddy cocktail. He was sipping back a brew.

"What do you think about God?" I had asked him.

"God?" He responded, obviously surprised at the suddenness of my question.

"Yes, God."

Here he took a long drink of his Miller, and stared at the stack of limes on the other side of the bartender. He didn't answer, so I leaned back, and took a swig of my cocktail. The cherries were still intact.

"I don't know, honey."

It broke a three minute silence. I stirred the ice around in my drink and waited. A couple at the other end of the bar was making out.

"I guess I don't believe in God. People gotta do what's right for them."

I waited some more. The ice clinked softly. The man across the bar stuck out his tongue and traced the girl's cheek.

"When I was electrocuted... remember that? When I was thirty?"

I nodded.

“ Well, I think I died for a little while. It was all black, and I kept waiting to see the light, hear the voices – you know, all that light at the end of the tunnel junk. God and lights and angels. Well. It never happened.”

He drew a long sip and I watched him swallow a small ice cube. The couple left holding hands.

“All I remember when my brother shook me awake was me thinking, ‘Why the fuck would you go and do that?’ It was the most peaceful sleep I ever had. The most peaceful dream.”

There it was. There was the big one. I knew it had to come. My father set his beer down.

“Maybe it was because God knew you weren’t going to die.”

He pushed his empty beer toward the bartender.

“Maybe, honey, maybe.”

I knew not to take my father lightly, regardless of the fact that we were at a bar and I was sipping a kiddy cocktail. If he would have told me one of his beloved corny jokes, I would have drank it up faster than my cherry juice.

“Where do you find a dog with three legs?”

“Where, Dad.”

“Right where you left him!”

He could have rattled off three more, told me Bob Segar was god, and that Elvis really was on an island in the Caribbean with Tupac. I would have begged him for more.

My father’s words had always been separate treasures for me. Maybe it was because we shared the same birthday. Maybe it was because he didn’t talk much. Either way, I lapped them up like a dehydrated dog.

For some reason, though, after talking to my father at the bar, I didn’t feel how I expected I would feel. I didn’t feel older or part of his group. There was a log of sorts, in my head, recording the conversation into the fissures of my brain. *Note: Father doesn’t believe in God stop Entertains the idea of death as dispersion and dream stop Peaceful sleep stop.* I could almost see the words typing themselves.

Part of me felt guilty, like I was failing dangerously at a game I needed to win to save lives of the hungry and helpless. I was ashamed of the way I factually integrated his words into my life. Dad is atheist. Dad is atheist. Dad. Is. Atheist. It reminded me a bit of the shame I had felt when I was six and my father brought me back a stuffed cookie monster after he had been gone a month from sailing on the boat.

“Here you go, sweetheart,” and he handed me a stuffed cookie monster. I had wanted a pony. A doll. Anything else.

“Thanks, Daddy,” I said and went to my room.

When I got to my room, I began to throw a fit. I cried and screamed and threw the cookie monster against the wall. I punched, I kicked, I wailed. I heard my dad ask my mom if I liked my present. My mom came into my room and said that if I didn’t like my present, I could just give it back to Daddy. I looked at my toy and suddenly realized that my daddy had probably worked very hard to pick something out that he thought I would like. I began to cry tears with feelings that I think many adults still cannot feel.

That was years ago, and I’m in a new room now. I can’t even remember the color of my old walls. I have a desperate thought that I want to find the stuffed cookie monster, but I know I lost it years ago. I wish I still had it.

But I’m done with wishes and shame and my father’s stumbles at two a.m. He never knew that I sat up in bed waiting for the dog to bark, the door to open, and for him to make his shaky climb upstairs to my mother’s bedroom. He never needed to know. He only needed to know that he slept soundly after drinking four Jack and Coke’s, eight beers, two stinger’s, and my mom’s entire store of courage within her heart.

It was seven o’clock now and growing darker. The kitchen was quiet. I got out of bed, walked upstairs, and watched my mother knit something orange while sitting in her recliner. She lifted her head when I came in and asked if I wanted to watch “Singing in the Rain” with her. Her hair was in straggles and I could see tear streaks lining her cheeks. She was smiling and I wondered if my father had ever seen her so beautiful.

“Do you think Daddy went to heaven?”

I once wanted to tell people about heaven. Be a missionary. That was until I realized that Uganda, Zimbabwe, Somalia, and Iraq would just as soon slit my throat as they would listen to stories about Jesus.

My mom put down her knitting needles and looked at me so intently I thought my cookie monster had come back.

“It’s possible you know.”

As I said it, I felt my clothes around my skin and I began to push. They were tight. Tight as hell. I couldn’t believe how tight they were or the fact that I hadn’t noticed before. My armpits were wet. My hands were cold. My mom stood up.

“I mean, we just talked about it two weeks ago. Dad and I.”

Dad. The word felt sticky. Daddy. Papa. Father. Guardian.

My mom was walking toward me.

Dad should have been next to her. Athiest dad. Kings and lies and family ties. Albino Jesus. Ladies and crabapple trees.

I realized I was sitting on the floor. It was warm. A rug underneath me. A hand on my back.

My jeans were tight. I wanted to take them off.

A truck backfired outside.

“Just a push. Just a push.”

An orange afghan was lying on the couch. A pair of shins at eye level.

“Why can’t electricity meet people?”

“I don’t know, Dad.”

“It doesn’t know how to conduct itself!”

Stumbling up the stairs at two a.m. Trying to construct a hammock in the back yard. Drinking a beer watching the Packers.

“People gotta do what people gotta do.”

Stallions and ponies. My brother’s AA class.

“I kept waiting to see the light, hear the voices – God and angels and light.”

Smudged Levi’s. Brillo pads.

“Maybe, honey, maybe.”

Birthday buddies. Cookie monster.

“I love you.”

I love you.

The room burst into splinters. The light crashed in from all sides of the room. In my eyes, ears, nose. Something smelled bad. Vomit?

A pair of eyes was staring into mine. My mom’s. Hazel, flecked with pain. Plenty of heartache. Maternal concern. But missing something.

And then I knew. I couldn’t see the worry.

She was free.

The light fizzled, pinpointed, and closed in quick circular motions. Round and round and round... out.