

*Almost Never Dying*

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1. In your dreams you are almost never dying. It has only happened three times. You always have a hard time distinguishing what's real from what's a dream, and sometimes, trying to split the difference, you ask the people in your life if they remember a moment you shared and they don't. You mark that memory as a dream.

2. You remember the dream-deaths like movies you used to watch at sleepovers, late at night when all the other kids fell asleep and left you awake in eerie pools of dark: the first time you die you fall off a moonlit cliff after eavesdropping on characters from PBS' *Arthur* as they stood muttering quiet ideas in the half-dark. You reach for the moon as you fall but it twists into a silk and lace pillow your grandmother sewed. The fabric runs through your fingers like cream.

3. The second time you die, you are with a friend and you get run off the road by men who want you dead. They shoot you both. For some reason, you are holding a baby in your arms, glowing dewey pink, with tufts of hair sticking up like blades of wheat. They shoot the baby.

4. The third time you ever die in a dream, you are standing on top of a cliff overlooking the sea, holding the hand of your best friend from childhood. Her fist feels so tiny, coiled up in your grip. The sensations build like Legos around you: the salt air, thick and humid, curling around you; the tiny beach, full of gritty pebbles and tangles of kelp; and the road, snaking sideways along the beach, starting and ending in a curtain of fog. Your friend says something that doesn't make

sense and your feet tug you forward and suddenly you are leaping, cutting the distance between you and the writhing breakwater. You die as you hit the water. The shock of it is almost rude.

5. When you die, time flows dark and murky and around you, pressing heavily into your limbs as if you are steeping in a womb of gravel and gravity. You float in the dark space and think about the clarity and color of the water until your alarm wakes you up. You are shaking. You don't quite know why.

6. In your dreams you are never dying, except for the times when you are. You don't understand the three times that you have. Sometimes you tell people that you never die in your dreams. You have not died in a dream since you were eleven.

7. Sophomore year of high school, you go on a backpacking trip to the San Juan Islands with a smattering of childhood friends. This is real, not a dream. You sit in the back of a twelve-passenger van.

8. You drive down a winding road, somewhere in the San Juan Islands, somewhere you could never find on a map. You stare forward, thinking of nothing, when every hair rises on your body like a warning in braille. You look around.

9. A winding road, carving through the trees, flashes of the ocean off to your right. As the trees break and the sky swings open you get a view of a tiny beach, gritty with pebbles and kelp, and you see it: a cliff, stretching out over water that is both opaque and deep teal. Somehow you are

here again. The last time you saw it you were dreaming and dying with your childhood best friend— but she is here again too. Her left hand is coiled up in your own- a tiny bud of corporeality, transferred from one mode of existence to the next. Your heart beats like it never has before.

10. Once, years later, you tell a friend about this experience. Afterward, he asks what you think would have happened if you would have jumped off the cliff again. He asks if you think you finally would have woken up. You think of this from time to time. The shock of it is almost rude.