

LINES FROM SUPERHERO MOVIES I'VE SEEN

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Marléne Zadig

It clobbers me like a sledgehammer right in the solar plexus, this idea that I should stop and save this raccoon trying to drag itself out of the soaked road after getting run over. Run over by whom exactly?—who knows. One, maybe two vehicles darted past before I spotted him. Or maybe lots of people had already zoomed by, it's hard to say for sure. Maybe everybody hits a raccoon at least once in a lifetime.

I'm late—never mind for what. Doesn't matter. What matters is that I figure out how to get the raccoon out of the middle of the road without getting rabies. I flick on the hazard lights and idle behind it so folks'll have to veer around us to get by. They're honking already, even the ones who can see what I'm trying to do. By god—they're monsters.

The blinking lights on my car flash on and off, steady like a strobe at a nightclub in slow-mo. The rain flips from invisible to voltaic then back to invisible all over again, and I want to die from the pain of how crushingly scenic it all is. The raindrops slash at the air in long, slanted blades slicing into the void, the way rain looks in a child's illustration of rain—hash marks in a half-drawn world.

It's alive, anyway. Eyes open, breathing. No guts pouring out onto the pavement as far as I can tell. The little guy—girl maybe?—struggles with its hind legs. He/she's propped up like a paraplegic on its forelimbs, rolls of tummy fat getting in the way. Let's say it's a she.

"She's" in obvious need of prompt medical attention. Moving her to the side of the road isn't gonna do shit for her in the long run. But we're in the heart of the city, no wildlife rescue facilities within twenty miles. I know it's a long shot, but sometimes you see those emergency vet shows where someone brings in an injured wild animal, like a turtle with dehydration or whatnot, and if it's a slow day the staff treats it purely out of compassion. For practice. Who doesn't try to save a mortal in peril? That's just basic human decency right there.

Still, there's this business of rabies. There was this podcast I heard recently where a woman alone in the woods got slightly mauled by a rabid raccoon in New England somewhere and almost died. It took her right to the edge of forty-eight hours to reach medical assistance, and if you don't get the vaccine before then, you're as good as dead. You're toast, really.

I pop the trunk and pine for a shovel, but there's only these colossal cookie sheets I promised to pick up for Elvin's science project that's due tomorrow. Who names their kid Elvin, by the way? Not me, if I'm being quite honest. Everyone mishears it as "Elven," which always seemed to me a little on the nose. Anyway, I didn't name him that. I lobbied for "Carleton" because then you could call him "Carl"—a name which almost embodies the essence of bacon burgers sizzling on a charcoal grill. Any name that begins with a hard consonant suggests, "I am sharp and effective!" to the rest of the world. But "Elvin"... "Elvin" says, "My parents are tools."

So these cookie sheets in the trunk, they're the disposable aluminum kind, the same material as takeout pie pans. They're huge but flimsy as hell, and besides, if I use them to scoop up the raccoon, they might get contaminated with rabies, and then I can't let the kid use them for his science project after all.

But they're all I've got, and if I leave her here and go about my business, somebody is guaranteed to finish the job. I can't be responsible for that, not after running over the family dog in the driveway three months ago.

I yank two aluminum sheets from the trunk and fold one of them in half to nudge the animal onto the other one. The road is a moonscape of potholes cratering the pavement all around us. A real

warzone. They've all swelled up with rainwater and so every time a car passes, the raccoon and I both catch a spray of grey sludge right in the teeth, like penance. We bond over the adversity inherent to our mutual circumstances. The raccoon's drab coat absorbs the filth without much impact, but my khakis are beyond salvation.

She's in a daze but more than happy to just lie there like a nude in a painting while I scrape her off the road. The weight of her body is non-trivial; the floppy cookie sheet warps and sags. I look into her eyes, and funnily enough, she looks back. *What do you see in there, little fella? Can you see into the depths of my soul?* She looks to be about as cognizant as a dog, maybe even more so, and I feel like I am awaiting her silent judgment but can't make out the verdict in the slightest.

The rain rattles on the tin pan and a smear of pink blood dribbles down the surface. There's a wound somewhere that I can't quite see. I hoist her up with the cookie sheet, which bows almost to the breaking point until I deposit both container and creature into the trunk of my car. I wonder what the chances are of this particular raccoon being infected and if/how I will ever be able to get the rabies out of the upholstery.

A few taps on my phone, and I'm en route to the nearest veterinary hospital. I vow to pay for any and all medical care that this particular critter may need, no matter what it takes, no matter if it drives me bankrupt. I don't call ahead: better to ask forgiveness than permission, isn't that what they always say?

When I arrive at the clinic, there are no other patients in the waiting room and I figure I've hit jackpot. The vet is leaning with his back and head against the wall in the universal sign of total abject boredom, like he's given up on life entirely. He's just shooting the shit with two female vet techs behind the counter, in between blowing these great big bubbles of chewing gum that pulsate as he blows—out, then in—like a goddamned human heart. I look around for signs of a reality show film crew but there are none present.

"Hey, are you guys open?"

He lets his bubble pop and gathers the gum back in his mouth, but one stray filament still dangles in the crease of his chin like spider silk.

"I know this sounds crazy, but I've picked up a raccoon who was

hit by a car, and she needs medical attention. I've got her in my trunk but could use some help getting her out."

The vet seems suddenly alarmed, as if this were some kind of zombie situation. "How did you get it in your car? Did it scratch you?" His eyes are all bugged out now from adrenaline, like gobstoppers that have been sucked down to the whites. They bulge out of instinct, I guess, to capture extraneous visual details about the situation that we ourselves are too dumb to see.

"No, it didn't scratch me. It's fine, I used a cookie sheet."

One of the staffers holds her hand up to her mouth like she might be laughing at me.

"*What?*" I say.

"Sorry. I had to yawn," she says, but she keeps her hand up there just the same.

The vet folds his arms across his chest.

"We don't treat raccoons. They are almost guaranteed to be carrying rabies. You should have let it be."

His hair is so plastered with product that even though it is the end of the day—even if it were the end of the world, I bet—not a strand is out of place, not a speck, not a particle. When he stands up straight and moves away from the wall, his absence reveals a grease print on the wallpaper where his head was at rest. It resembles the skull of something I've never even seen before, something that might not even exist yet. A being from the future when we're all more evolved.

"Let it be? Let it *be*? It would've been crushed by a car and I would've been responsible, I couldn't just let it be. This isn't your favorite Beatles song we're talking about here, man, this is *real life*."

The staff members are gaping at me now like I have worms wriggling out of my ears. Like maybe I already *have* rabies—which is impossible, I know, but still.

"*Please*," I say, and I let it hover in the air like a foul burp in a cramped room. "No one else will help me. She's going to die, for Christ's sake! It's up to you now."

I admit that I sometimes pluck generic lines from superhero movies I've seen and insert them into actual conversations, but this time for once it seems entirely apropos.

"You'll need to call animal control. We're closed now. And we

don't treat raccoons. As in, *ever*."

Some hero.

"How can you be closed? You're a hospital," I insist.

But I see I'm getting nowhere, so I duck back outside, and the damp air coaxes the sweat from my pores until my clothes are waterlogged both inside and out, until I am just a soggy sponge sopping up a parking lot. By the time the animal control truck arrives, the raccoon in my trunk has rebounded—literally, it is banging around in the back of my car—and I have lost my way.

Sheila sends me a text. *Did you pick him up yet?*

At first I think, *Yes, but actually, it's a "her."* Then I remember what she means and type:

No.

There was an accident. I'm trying to save a—

I pause and picture the "... " palpitating on her screen like the pulse of a butterfly as she awaits my full reply.

—cat. That got hit. By a car—I didn't see who hit it. Tell the school I'll be a little late.

She doesn't reply, doesn't even do me the honor of opening my text so that it is marked as "read."

He'll be fine. The library stays open for awhile after school hours, so it's not like he's out there waiting for me in the rain.

The animal control gal is stout and sturdy, which is more than I can say for me. She hears the raccoon ramming against the walls of my car and looks at me sideways.

"Do I have worms coming out of my ears or something? Because everyone keeps looking at me like I might."

"You know that raccoons carry rabies," she declares, as if I don't already know. As if anyone could be stupid enough in this world to *not already frickin' know*.

"Yes. I was trying to save her after she was hit by a car, incidentally."

The raccoon is now body-chucking the inside of my car.

"Well it seems fine now." She holds up her throat-grabber animal-catcher pole thing and takes a step back. "Why don't you pop the trunk just a smidge and I'll try to capture it as it pokes its head out. Worst comes to worst, we can slam the trunk back down and knock it

unconscious if we have to."

That is not something I am going to let happen on my watch. *Worst comes to worst*—I'm thrusting the trunk door wide open and letting her go out into the great wild beyond.

How is it that if you hold up a human by a noose around our necks, we'll die, but if you do it to an animal, it doesn't die? How is that even possible?

The raccoon noses its way out of the opening, and the animal control gal loops her torture device around its neck, to much scrambling and vigorous protest from the raccoon. Her back legs seem to work fine now. In fact, she seems outright cured—miraculous.

A great battle ensues as the animal control lady—PAM, if the stitching on her jumpsuit is to be believed—fights to wedge the flailing, dangling raccoon into a holding pen in the truck, but the raccoon's not dumb. She juts her limbs out in all directions like a cartoon cat refusing to go in the bathtub, like she's seen every episode of the old-school *Tom & Jerry*, and she's got this down. Pam eventually has to just shove it in without regard for whether or not her actions are causing the animal any distress, just—*WHLAM!* Locked and latched.

"I don't understand," I say. I *don't*. "A half-hour ago I watched her get hit by a car—I didn't see what kind of car, mind you—but it was definitely a car of some sort. She couldn't even pull herself out of the road."

"Yeah. You see that a lot with raccoons. It probably has rabies."

Pam explains to me that the virus imbues them with superhero strength for a period of time before there are any other symptoms so that it's more able to attack someone and spread the virus to other hosts.

"It's kind of like when you see videos of some guy who's jacked up on PCP and it takes ten other guys to bring him down. Except in this case the PCP is rabies, and it kills everyone involved."

I take a long lonely look at the open trunk of my car. I wonder if the raccoon maybe peed in my car. Also, if its pee could transmit rabies. Plus, there's the small smear of bloody rain on the cookie sheets, which Elvin still needs for his science project. By now, the craft store where I finally found them is most certainly closed.

"Bleach," she says—Pam, that is, the animal control gal—

following my gaze into the open maw that is the disheveled trunk of my car. “I recommend bleach for the hard surfaces, and burning all the rest.” She shrugs. “But that’s just me.”

All the rest includes some old towels, a chewed-up Frisbee, a few grimy tennis balls, and a leash that I haven’t yet thrown away.

Before leaving, Pam tells me they’ll test the raccoon and if it’s positive they’ll give me a call in the next twenty-four hours.

“And if it isn’t?” I ask.

“We’ll put it down either way; it’s just to let you know if you’ve been exposed.”

* * *

I text Sheila that I’m on my way to the school now. Then I use an entire bottle of hand sanitizer on both my hands and the car handles, and I spread the remainder over my phone. I text Sheila again to tell her that the cat in question in fact lived because of my intervention.

“...”

Those three bitchy dots, fluttering and elusive across the screen—there, and suddenly not there—are all I get in reply.

When I pull up to the school loading zone, there is Elvin, hovering like a nitwit on a bench out in the rain with his clarinet case cradled in his lap. A freaking martyr at age ten. I reach over to open the passenger door and yell, “What in the ever-loving heck are you doing out here, kid? Did you consider maybe waiting in the library? Or like, borrowing an umbrella from a teacher? Come on.”

“The teachers have all gone home,” he says, in a way that’s both tremendously sad and wise and stoic at the same time, like he’s delivering a line in a Bob Dylan song: *The teacherrrrs have aaalllllll gone hooooommmme.*

He climbs into the car. “The library has been closed for thirty-seven minutes,” he adds. All cold and impassive like he’s Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

“Well, shit, kid. I’m sorry. I ran into—I mean, not *I, myself* ran into it, mind you—but I *came across*—so to speak—this big huge cat in the road that had been hit by a car, and I carried it to safety but it was very badly hurt, and you know—life or death situation, I chose life and took it to the vet.”

“Okay,” is all he says.

Is *all* he *says*.

“And good thing I did, I might add, because the cat was on death’s door. But it lived. Some internal injuries, but it’s going to live, they told me. All because of yours truly picking you up late from school. I *am* sorry about that, I will say, but it was for a good cause, you’ll be happy to hear.”

Who am I kidding? Not him, not me. Not anybody, likely. Not even the man in the moon is fooled. Still, as they say, the show must go on.

“Did you pick up the cookie sheets for my project?”

His wet shoes squeak and squidge against the rubber mat on the floor like the last feeble breaths of a mouse as it’s swallowed by a snake.

“You bet I did, though I’m going to have to bleach them first before you can use them—don’t ask. It’s just that I think they’re contaminated with something. They don’t seem right to me, and I wouldn’t want them to interfere with your results. What is your science project about, anyway? The old baking soda and vinegar volcano trick, by any chance? I love that old trick.”

He keeps squelching those shoes, making the noise purely for my benefit, so that I’ll feel bad about how wet he is, but I’m just as wet as him.

“That’s not a science project, Dad, that’s a demonstration.”

“Well okay. I do like that one, though. So what’s it gonna be, then?”

“It’s a meat tenderizer experiment. A study of the efficacy of various different techniques for meat tenderizing. I’m calling it ‘Meat Science!’ Mom wouldn’t let me use her Pyrex dishes, so that’s why we need the cookie sheets. For serving.”

“Serving...”

“The meat. For taste testing at the science fair. People will taste the meat after we’ve cooked it using different meat tenderizer methods and rate each type on various assorted indices of chewiness. And then I’ll plot the data and turn it in.”

“Ohhhhh, okay, no. Then we definitely can’t use the cookie sheets. Like I said, they’re probably contaminated. I don’t think bleach is going to be enough if folks are going to be eating off of them. We

should pick something else.”

“I can’t. It’s due tomorrow, and Mom already bought all the meat. I thought you would like this idea.”

My hair is dripping wet down my face and so is his, and I take one hand from the steering wheel to wipe a few stray drops away from my eyes. All of a sudden they burn like hell—*Oh*—from the copious amounts of hand sanitizer, no doubt, and I start to cry, not in the sense that I am actually crying but in the sense that there are technically tears forming of their own accord and fleeing from my face, without my direct involvement.

Oh.

“I do, oh, don’t get me wrong, I definitely do like a meat-related science project. That’s very clever, son. It’s just—we need a different serving option. Can’t we just use regular cookie sheets from home?”

It occurs to me then that perhaps hand sanitizer doesn’t cover rabies. I grab the empty bottle from the cup holder and try to read the label through the blur: “Kills 99.9% of bacteria.” But it doesn’t say a damned thing about viruses. I feel as though I’ve been lied to on so many levels.

“The cookie sheets at home don’t have a lip, and the juices will run off onto all the desks.”

I picture the pinkish rainy blood rolling down the sheets after I’d nudged the raccoon in the back of the car and wonder if any of that mixture has now seeped into my eyes. If the burning sensation is just the rabies taking hold.

“Alright. Alright. Juice and lips—okay. Well, listen, why don’t we go out together and get us some pie? We can just go to Denny’s and buy ten pies, and transfer them to your mom’s Pyrex dishes, wash the pans, and serve up the meat in the pie pans. Maybe we can even eat some of the pie while we’re at it, eh?”

Tears are pouring out in streams by now completely independent of my internal state. I wipe them with my sleeve and then wipe all over to make it seem like it’s just rain dripping down from my hair still. I don’t want Elvin to get the wrong idea.

“Or...” he pauses then for dramatic effect to make me feel even more like a moron. He’s not even looking my way. “Can’t we just go to the grocery store and buy disposable pie pans to save a bunch of

money on not having to buy pie?”

“Yeah, okay, sure. But how about that pie, huh? Sure sounds good right about now. I could sure use a nice slice of pie.”

We arrive home after not too long on the road, but as we walk toward the house I realize we have not gone out for either pie or pie pans. It strikes me that Elvin intentionally didn’t mention anything about it just so I’d have to put it together on my own and feel like a complete and utter asshole.

“You know what, I figure I can just build you some serving platters—with lips, mind you, to catch the juice—out of cardboard and aluminum foil. Those disposable cookie sheets were flimsy as hell anyway, and I’m sure I could make something better.”

“Sure, Dad.”

I can hardly see anything anymore what with the hand sanitizer situation and the rain and everything else going on.

“Why don’t you go on inside, and I’ll be there in a minute. I think I’ve got something in my eye. Gonna try and let the rain rinse it out.”

He disappears over the threshold, which I can barely make out as a portal of light that opens and shuts into seemingly another universe entirely, one from which I appear to be in exile.

Who am I kidding with the hand sanitizer? I am already beyond contaminated. After I pop open the trunk and remove the soiled sheets of aluminum, I throw them directly into the outside trashcan. Then I crawl into the trunk myself and close the hatch. I’ll head in for a shot tomorrow.

The smell is of life, death, and decay all at once, a musty compost stinking of blood and piss and a hint of squished worms that I almost can’t stand. But instead of crawling into the belly of the beast, I feel as though I’ve re-entered the womb of the world, the place whence I originated. I wind the frayed leash around my fist and rest my head on a trio of old tennis balls, then bawl like the baby I am and the man I aim to be.

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