

Rid Me of All My Asking

Ira

The living room carpet is scratchy against my cheek, but I don't move from where I'm lying. To move would be to accept the events of the last week, events I don't want to even acknowledge happened. If I stay right here, mindlessly petting Mom's cat, then maybe Jo will walk in the door and wonder why her family is sitting in the living room looking like zombies.

Maybe.

My sweet Ira,

I'll hold onto that and continue to sift through memories, digging deeper and deeper until I can find one that doesn't hurt. But I can't because the things we want to forget most wind up being the things we remember forever. Like, I'd really love to forget the day when my family's overweight, fourteen-year-old French bulldog named Buzz Lightyear keeled over and died while I was taking him for a walk.

I was six when it happened, twelve years ago, but I can still remember dragging that sack of bricks home during the hottest summer Sarasota had ever seen. And I do mean that I literally dragged Buzz Lightyear's body at least three blocks.

You are stronger than you know. I've seen it in you every day that I've known you.

Yes, the neighbors saw. No, they didn't say anything. Florida has certainly seen weirder.

Come on, I was just a little six-year-old girl in overalls. I thought he'd fallen asleep, and I didn't quite understand death yet. You can blame that on Mom and Jo if you want, for not teaching me from a young age that things die and don't come back, but honestly, I don't think six-year-olds need to fully be aware of that stuff, lest their small, idyllic worlds get punctured.

Needless to say, I certainly learned about death that day.

Death is but the final adventure of life, one that is coming for me sooner than we all expected. It's okay. I'm going to be okay. You're going to be okay.

Or, I guess I thought I did.

When I finally got Buzz Lightyear back to our house, I left him in the driveway to go inside and get him some water for when he "woke up." I remember feeling frustrated because I wanted to go and play with Amara, my next-door neighbor and now girlfriend.

Tell Amara you love her every single day. Don't be afraid to say it a million times if you need to. You have so much love inside of you. Share it.

I was standing on a little stool in front of the kitchen sink, filling up Buzz Lightyear's bowl when Jo came into the kitchen.

Quick tangent: yes, I call my mom by her first name, but it's because she wanted me to.

"Being called 'Mom' makes me feel old," she'd say.

My other mom, who I actually do call Mom, would scrunch her eyebrows. "What does that say about me?"

"Well, you are old."

"Jo, I'm only a year older than you." And then Mom would pretend to be upset, and Jo would kiss her and they'd be really cute and gross, but I can't think about that right now because it hurts too much.

I'm sure this probably plays into the fact that Mom is more of a stereotypical soccer mom and Jo was more like the type of woman who lives by herself with a bunch of cats and books and crystal balls that she swears are just for decoration. You know the type.

Being your mom has been my greatest accomplishment in life, and it's one I never thought I'd get to experience. I'm grateful that I can say I played a part in who you are today, someone I love more than I ever thought possible.

I'm getting too far into this tangent, down a path I can't come back from, so back to the whole dead dog thing that I wish I could forget about but can't.

Jo came into the kitchen, her long, floral sundress making her look something like a goddess. She asked, "Ira, what are you doing? Where's Buzz Lightyear?"

I can't remember exactly how I responded, but I think it was something along the lines of, "He fell asleep on the walk, and I'm getting him water for when he wakes up because he's probably really hot."

What I do remember, however, is the look on Jo's face, the widening of her eyes, the paling of her skin. I was only six, but I understood these facial cues, and they weren't good.

"Did I do something wrong?" I asked, holding the full bowl of water in my hands.

"Oh, love, no. No. Let me just-" She came over and grabbed the bowl from my hands. "Can you sit at the table? I need to get Liz; she'll know what to do."

After Jo put the bowl down on the counter, she went to get Mom, and I watched from the kitchen table as they embraced in the living room, sharing quiet words. Mom was still in her pajamas, her short brown, curly hair not quite tamed yet.

Mom is short, so short that Jo would call her Pip just to piss her off, but I remember thinking that Mom looked extra short that morning in Jo's arms.

Mom went past me on her way outside, giving me a couple of quick kisses on the top of my head before going to take care of Buzz Lightyear. Jo kneeled down on the floor in front of my chair, and her smile was sweet and loving, albeit forced.

Her long blonde, braided hair was draped over her shoulder, and I remember thinking it looked like rope.

“Ira, Buzz Lightyear died. Do you know what that means?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Means he fell asleep.”

“Kind of, yeah, but he’s in a really, really deep sleep, and he’s not going to wake up. It’s not your fault though, love. Buzz Lightyear was really old, and that’s just what happens when dogs get old. The most important thing is that he had a good life, yeah?”

“Yeah, but where is he now?”

Death does not mean that I’m gone forever, I hope you know this. My physical body is just a vessel, and I will continue to live on through you, Cal, and Mom. I will always be with you.

This memory might be a bit hazy for me, but I will never forget this next part as long as I live.

Jo didn’t even hesitate when she said, “The savor of wandering in the ocean of deathless life has rid me of all my asking: as the tree is in the seed, so all diseases are in this asking.”

Jo and her mystic poetry, I swear.

“What does that mean?” my naïve, innocent self asked.

“You’ll know one day, okay?”

I don’t want you feeling guilty about anything, got it? Grief does odd things, and you need to know that none of this is your fault. None of this is anyone’s fault. This is just the way things are, and I know that might be hard to hear right now.

I nodded and jumped up to give her a hug, not because I needed one, but because I thought she did. I think Jo thought I was upset, too, but I wasn’t really. I was sad by association which is absolutely not the same thing as being sad.

Not even ten years later, we’d be at the same dinner table finding out that Jo was sick, and I’d be just as confused then as I was when Buzz Lightyear died.

Human memory is unreliable as hell, and I know I was preoccupied with my hair for at least half of Jo’s lecture about Buzz Lightyear. I hated my hair when I was little. It wasn’t red enough to be pretty, but it wasn’t brown enough to be normal. When I was eight, I took scissors to it and just cut and cut and cut. It all had to be shaved off in the end, and Jo was a little mad, but I think she secretly liked it.

My hair has never reached past my chin since then, and I don’t think it ever will again.

There was a cloud of sadness over the entire house that night. Even the plants looked droopier than normal. Jo liked to think she’d be able to turn the house into a botanist’s wet dream,

and Mom appeased her. I mean, there were plants everywhere: on tables, on walls, hanging from the ceiling even. Our house should have been teeming with life, but Jo could never keep a plant alive to save her life. She never gave up on them, though. Even if they were long gone, she'd try and salvage them.

I didn't feel the cloud lift until Cal came home from summer camp the next morning. He came into my room before he even had a chance to put his bag down, his sand-dusted hair longer than I ever remembered it being. "Hey, butthead," he said. "Heard you killed Buzz Lightyear."

I thought he was serious at first, but then I saw his mouth break into a smile, and I felt that weird tightness in my chest start to go away. His long, lanky body takes up a lot of room, but he's a man of few words. Somehow, Cal has a way of making everything lighter. But when I look over at him now, he's on the couch staring blankly at the ceiling, and I don't remember the last time he blinked.

I don't think he's going to be able to make things lighter now. Nothing has ever felt heavier, and I know he feels it, too.

Mom sits in the recliner in one corner of the living room, staring at the empty bean bag in the other corner of the room where Jo always used to sit. She's drinking her fourth cup of coffee of the day.

It's almost ten at night.

You are not alone. Ever. Cal and Mom are hurting, too. Be with them, talk to them, lean on them.

It's the knowing that hurts. When Buzz Lightyear died, there was mostly confusion, but I *know* now. I know that Jo isn't going to walk through the door, and I know that she isn't just "asleep."

I know I'm going to forget what she looked like and what she sounded like. I know that memories don't last.

Death doesn't just happen to fourteen-year-old, overweight French bulldogs named Buzz Lightyear. Sometimes death happens to the most caring, loving person you know, and your brain can't understand how something so awful could happen to someone so good, so *human* that it forces you to relive something else instead. Something safer.

You have a fire in you, love. Always have, always will. Don't suppress it. Feel it, feel everything. You will come out the other side, I just know it.

I'm right here, always.

Love, Jo

But it all leads back to Jo. Every memory ends with her dying, with me wondering how this could have happened. I don't want those memories.

I want her.

Cal

I was convinced from a young age that I would grow up to be a pilot.

I was eight.

I'm a bass player in a band with a bunch of people I met on Craigslist.

I'm twenty-five.

Things change.

My friend Refried Joe knew he wanted to be a mall cop since the day he was born, apparently.

Refried Joe's a weird guy, nicknamed after the refried beans incident we don't talk about anymore.

He's had very little change in his life, but I think he's secretly miserable.

It's been one week since Jo died.

Things change.

I'm miserable.

Cal,

I got the call from Mom exactly two weeks ago during rehearsal in Miami. Our band, London Lilywhites, had just sold out our first 1,000-person venue, so we'd been rehearsing like mad.

The show would've been two days ago. I assume they played without me, found a replacement. I don't care.

Your mind is beautiful, but don't let it run circles around you.

Anyway, Mom's call was frantic; I could barely make out any of the words, but I caught enough:

Jo.

Hospital.

Get here now.

I'd gotten calls like this from Mom before, but there was something immediately different about this one.

She was in tears.

Things were bad, and I wasn't prepared for it.

How was I supposed to be prepared for it?

You were never supposed to be prepared for something like this. Don't trick yourself into believing you were.

The three-and-a-half-hour drive back to Sarasota was a long one, a quiet one. No amount of loud music could drown out the thoughts in my head. I was white-knuckled on the steering wheel the whole way.

I still can't get the image out seeing Jo unconscious in a hospital bed out of my mind. As I stare up at the blank ceiling, it's all I see.

She was so tiny, so devoid of life, the one thing she was always full of.

It hurts that you have to see me this way, and I hope you can find a way to remember me differently.

It was a shock to the senses.

"Well damn, Cal, don't just gawk at her," Ira said when she saw me standing in the doorway of Jo's hospital room.

I took a couple of hesitant steps into the room to see Ira leaning against the window sill with her arms crossed at her chest, shoulders slumped. Her short red hair looked like she'd been trying to pull it out of her head.

It was her finals week.

The hospital room was uninviting, impersonal. It was too cold and too hot all at the same time.

Looking back at her made me feel sick to my stomach. The person in that bed was not my mom.

I hope you can remember me as someone who always loved you and never, ever would trade being your mom for the world.

And yet, there she was, surrounded by machines instead of the plants she loved so much (even if they were all mostly dead).

"What happened?" I asked Ira, dropping into a chair next to Jo's bed.

We'd been in the hospital with Jo before; this was nothing new.

What was new was that she looked like she was dying.

Ira sighed, shaking her head. "She just collapsed. Mom couldn't get her to wake up, so she called an ambulance. I left school as soon as she called me."

"Where is Mom?" I asked.

"Amara took her home to get some things."

I raised my eyebrows. "Amara came back with you?"

Ira avoided eye contact. "Of course she did; don't make a big deal about it."

It was a big deal, but I left it alone.

"How long has she been out?" I asked, nodding my head toward Jo.

“Two hours maybe. She was awake for a bit, but then they pumped her full of pain meds.”

The silence that followed was uncomfortable, filled with all the terrifying words that we weren't saying.

Don't be scared. I'm okay. I know you have a million questions, each one scarier than the last and one that's scariest of all.

Ira cleared her throat. “I'm going to try and find food that doesn't taste like plastic. Want anything?”

I shook my head, and Ira quickly left, closing the door behind her.

A question came to my mind that hadn't haunted me since I was young: where do we go when we die?

Where do we go when we die?

Jo always used to let me be afraid of the question, always let me feel it. It never mattered how late at night it kept me up; she wouldn't tell me I was being ridiculous or that an eight-year-old shouldn't be worrying about unanswerable questions.

She'd never give me the answer, either, or at least *her* answer.

It must've frustrated the hell out of you that I never gave you a straight answer, and maybe I should have, but the last thing I wanted to do was lie to you and pretend I knew the answer when I didn't. Even though you were so young, I didn't want to pretend.

Instead, she'd read me a poem by Kabir, some mystic she adored, always the same damn poem.

“What's on your sweet mind?”

Jo's scratchy voice pulled me from the childhood memory, startling me.

Instead of answering her, I spouted out panicky questions of my own. “How are you feeling? Do you need anything? Should I get a nurse?”

Her slender hand wrapped around my wrist. “Easy, Cal. Just talk to me.”

I was afraid to admit it, that I was thinking about death. When we found out Jo was sick, we all agreed not to talk about death because it wasn't going to happen to Jo, not anytime soon.

But I couldn't keep pretending like it wasn't happening.

“Where do we go when we die?”

Jo smiled sadly, and I felt like a kid again, needing his mom to calm him down, to get rid of his nightmares.

I'm living a nightmare.

Unsurprisingly, Jo answered with, “The savor of wandering in the ocean of deathless life has rid me of all my asking: as the tree is in the seed, so all diseases are in this asking.”

“The savor of wandering in the ocean of deathless life has rid me of all my asking: as the tree is in the seed, so all diseases are in this asking.”

“Jo.”

“I know it’s frustrating, love, but that’s the closest answer I have. It’s all right there, in that sentence.”

This is the answer I always gave you because it’s the one that makes the most sense to me.

Mom and Amara came into the room not even a minute later.

Jo died three days later.

Cancer is a *bitch*.

She’s dead, and I don’t know where she is.

It means I’m right here.

Not her physical body, obviously, but her soul, her essence, her whatever the hell you want to call it.

I’m scared she isn’t where she thought she would be.

I’m exactly where I want to be: with you, with Mom, with Ira. How can I die when I’m with you, when you’re going to keep my soul alive?

Sorry, Kabir, but we don’t all have the privilege of wandering through an ocean of deathless life.

Some of us still have questions, even unanswerable ones.

As Kabir says, diseases are in the asking. Let your questions go. I’m right here.

I finally tear my eyes off the ceiling, off the image of Jo in the hospital bed.

Ira is methodically petting Sammy, but her eyes are closed. She’s been wearing Jo’s clothes since the funeral.

Mom is staring at the plants on the mantle that haven’t been watered in days. The tears in her eyes could water them for weeks.

Focus your mind on those who love you, not on questions that will rot the thing I love most about you.

We’re silent.

What are we supposed to say?

I love you. Never let that be a question.

When I was eight, I was convinced I would grow up to be a pilot.

Things change.

Mom loves you. Ira loves you. You are loved, and that's what matters most in this life.

Lean into that love, and let it overpower everything else.

You are loved.

Love, Jo

I'm twenty-five, and all I'm convinced of now is that nothing will ever feel worse than this.

Liz

I don't feel anything.

There's a numbness that runs throughout my entire body, a general resistance to disregard the events of the last few weeks.

That's a lie.

Liz,

I feel everything.

Every inhale and exhale are reminders that I'm here and she's not. I'm on fire and the only person who can put me out is gone. The events of the last few weeks are etched into my brain forever. I can't disregard them even if I tried.

Pip.

When I feel my eyelids droop, I take another sip of coffee.

There's a moment just before consciousness takes over in the morning, when the brain still has one foot in a dream world. In this moment, you don't know what day it is, where you are, how you got there, or if it's even real. In this moment, you look for something to ground you, to bring you back.

My love.

Jo always brought me back.

I'd look to my left and she'd be there, dried drool on her face and hair a mess.

She won't be there anymore, and without her to drag my brain out of its dream world, then maybe I'd be stuck forever.

You beautiful, caring, strong woman.

I drink coffee so I won't have to know what it's like to sleep in a bed without her.

But maybe it's getting to my brain, instead.

I have never known someone as magnificent as you, and these last few months have only proved that.

I met Jo at freshman orientation at the University of Florida. One of the first things she said to me was, "I'm gay."

It was one of the first things she said to everyone she met, to weed out the homophobes and conversion therapy supporters. It was brilliant and worked wonders, especially in the 80's.

Unlike most people I met during freshman orientation, Jo and I stayed friends. Well, more like acquaintances, really. We hung out, but we never talked about anything more important than covalent bonds. I developed a crush on her very early on, but I was too insecure to act on it. I never thought she'd date me, let alone fall in love with me.

There is no one I would've rather spent the last thirty years with. I used to think that spending that many years with someone was outrageous. Now, I think the only outrageous thing is that I didn't ask you to be my forever person sooner.

That all changed junior year.

We were at our regular bar on a regular Friday night, except it wasn't all that regular. My dad died the day before, and I hadn't told anyone. I wanted to go out and pretend like my entire world wasn't falling apart.

Jo noticed something was wrong right and dragged me outside, away from the alcohol and loud music.

"Something's going on with you," she said.

I shrugged. "I'm fine."

"Do you want to look me in the eye and tell me that?"

I dragged my eyes up to hers. There was no getting past those green eyes, not then, not ever.

After more silence, Jo softly said, "Talk to me."

"My dad died yesterday."

There weren't many times Jo was stunned, but this was one of them. Even then, it took her all of three seconds before she was fiercely pulling me into a hug.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Liz?" she asked incredulously.

I couldn't hold back my tears then. "I thought I could get away from it all."

Death is inescapable. I realize that now.

I know you must be feeling like you want to put your emotions in a little box and lock them away, pretend like you're fine.

"Oh, Pip," she said, gripping me as hard as she probably could. "Can I take you back to your apartment?"

I forcefully shook my head in the crook of her neck. "I can't go back there. Not right now; he's everywhere."

"Okay, okay. Can I take you to mine, then? We can just hang out, watch a movie, make tea, whatever you want."

I relaxed in her arms. We weren't even dating yet, but she already knew exactly what I needed. She knew me.

You're not fine. There's nothing wrong with that, so do me a favor? Let someone worry over you since I can't be there to do it myself.

Stepping into her apartment that night was different than all the other nights I'd been there. It felt like home, and I didn't have the mental capacity to scold myself for feeling that way. Jo was just someone I had a crush on. A magnificent, intelligent, beautiful someone.

There was just something about all the half-dead plants in her apartment that was inviting, that made her seem real. So many of the other people I'd made "friends" with in college weren't.

Jo didn't wear clothes that were trendy just because they were trendy. She always asked how I was and actually cared about the answer. She had this ethereal presence but owned her mistakes and asked for forgiveness.

Jo never pretended.

I hate that I'm sick, and I hate that you have to see me like this. I know this isn't really what you signed up for, taking care of me. You'll never understand how much I appreciate every cup of tea, every blanket you lay over me.

She led me to the couch and draped a blanket over my shoulders before making mint chamomile tea in two mugs that were painted like turtles.

Her apartment smelled like lavender and oranges, and I never wanted to leave.

I welcomed the burning heat from the mug when she passed it to me. After sitting on the opposite end of the couch, legs crossing under her, she said, "Will you tell me about him?"

"About my dad?"

She smiled. "Yeah."

After maybe two hours and a box of tissues later, I told Jo, "I'm not religious."

You're not religious, but you're a saint. An angel. A goddess.

She gave me a funny look. "Okay? I'm not really, either."

"I have a lot of problems with organized religion. It's too culty. But at least they have answers."

"Answers to what?"

"To what happens after we die."

Jo reached for my hand across the couch and squeezed it tightly. "I'll be right back."

She went into her room and came back with a small book in her hand, tattered and worn.

I sniffled for the millionth time that night. "What's that?"

Jo flopped back down on the couch and opened to a specific page. "A book of poems by this mystic named Kabir. Even though his poems are rooted in religious traditions, they're more philosophical than anything. And comforting. At least to me."

"Read one to me," I said like she wasn't already planning to.

“This one’s my favorite: “The savor of wandering in the ocean of deathless life has rid me of all my asking: as the tree is in the seed, so all diseases are in this asking,” she paused. “No one has answers, not even religions. It’s all just guesses and hopes.”

You’re someone who has let me read philosophical poetry to them nearly every single night, even though you might hate it.

My breath hitched in my throat as I started to choke up again. It was beautiful, the poem. I didn’t really understand it, but Jo could’ve read the box score of a Marlins game and make it sound beautiful.

“Can I hug you?” I asked shyly.

“You don’t have to ask. Get over here.”

You’re someone who has loved me in ways I never knew I could be loved.

I came out to her that night, among the other confessions I made in my emotional state. She didn’t say “I know” or “I told you so” like she might’ve wanted to (she guessed that I was bi the day we met, before I even realized I was bi).

Jo was kind and comforting that night and every night after that one.

It’s hard to tear myself from the memory, from the only place Jo lives now.

We started dating two days after that. I asked her out. I fell in love with her when she embraced my weirdness instead of condemning it, when she showed interest in the things I obsessed over. I moved into her apartment a year later. We made a home together. We raised two beautiful kids together.

It’s not enough.

Jo was the wisest person I’ve ever known, but she often used her wisdom to cover up how she really felt. She wasn’t a perfect person, and she never tried to be.

I’ve always been honest with you, and I can put on a brave face for the kids, but I’m not brave around you. I don’t have to be. I can admit to you the one thing that I can barely admit to myself.

I know she was scared at the end. I could hear it in the silence of the words she wouldn’t say, in the sobs she thought were quiet in the middle of the night.

I’m so scared.

You don’t know pain until one of the people you love most in the world is in pain and you can’t do anything to help them.

I felt hopeless.

I feel hopeless.

I’m scared that what I believe won’t be true, that after I take my last breath, I’ll never see you, Ira, or Cal again. I’m scared that, soon, pain will be the only thing I remember. I’m scared of losing my mind.

I stare at the plants on the mantle, the plants that are now completely dead. I stare at the beanbag chair, the space Jo always used to occupy. Such simple things, dead plants and a beanbag chair. Such simple things that make me cry all over again. It's the lack of sleep, the abundance of caffeine, the realization that the love of my life is gone.

I'm all too aware that you're only going to be reading this letter after I'm gone, but I'm not gone, okay? I have to believe that I'm not going to be truly gone. And I need you to believe it, too. So please, don't you ever stop talking to me. I'll hear you, and I hope in some way, you'll be able to hear me, too.

It's Jo.

And it's our kids; it's Cal and Ira, both of them looking over at me with big, lost eyes, eyes that ask me what they're supposed to do.

How am I supposed to get them through this when I don't know if I'll get through it myself?

God, Jo, what am I supposed to do?

Hold the kids close, give them a good squeeze for me. Sometimes, that's all you can do.

I'm yours forever, my love.

Love, Jo

Two days later, I find the letters.

They're dated a month before Jo died.

Ira, Cal, and I read them in silence, in awe.

After, I catch Ira's eyes first, and she lets out a teary laugh. It's the first time I've seen her cry since the day Jo died.

Cal folds his letter back up but keeps it tightly in his hand like it holds the answers to the universe. Knowing Jo, it probably does.

I reach out to both of them and pull them close. It's the only thing I can do, the only thing that feels right.

Jo, I love you. I hear you.

Wander on, in your ocean of deathless life.