

THE LAST RIDE

A young man sat in a late model Toyota sedan in a McDonald's parking lot, glancing from a mobile phone mounted on an air vent to the front door. Drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, he shifted in his seat trying to get a better view of the restaurant interior.

Come on, this is my last ride. Don't make me cancel

The timer on the mobile phone changed to blood red and a cancel button appeared. There was no rider in sight.

Now I have to find another ride fuck my luck.

He cancelled the ride and turned up the heat, the wintery mix was turning to freezing slush on the windshield. Jumping out of the car, the man banged the windshield wipers against the windshield a few times to shake the ice free. Before getting back into the car, he scanned the surrounding area. Ice. The roads were turning into a skating rink in mere moments it seemed to him.

A beep from the phone forced him back into the car. He managed to accept the ride request one second before the 30 second timer expired.

Please be close, please be close he repeated as the app grasped for a signal in the intensifying storm. The driver app managed to find the ride. It was at the driver's current location but was not the rider he cancelled.

"Ella," he said out loud looking at the screen. The profile pic was of a beautiful young blonde woman, pretty enough to be a model.

That pic fake as fuck but I don't care it's my last ride, come on let's get this ride over before I die on these roads.

As if in answer to his stream of consciousness prayer, a young woman wearing a slicker yellow raincoat exited McDonald's and approached his car, holding out her mobile phone and then checking the license plate on the car before getting into the back right passenger seat.

"Hi, I'm Ella."

"Wow, you're beautiful," the driver blurted out almost against his will. "I figured that pic was fake. No worries about this ice storm, I'll get you home safe."

"Thanks, I guess." She tapped at her phone a few times before catching his gaze in the rearview mirror. "Get me home safely and you will get a generous tip."

The driver smiled and guided the car on to 146A N. He tapped the app screen to check the destination. _____ Mendon St, Uxbridge.

"Sweet. Real close. You're my last ride."

The blonde woman nodded indifference and kept tapping at her mobile. He watched her in the rearview, transfixed by her pale skin and perfectly straightened blonde hair. *How does she keep it like that in the winter?*

"You could be a model. That's how pretty you are, I don't mean to be a creep."

The tires slipped in an ice patch and jerked the car to one side.

"Better keep your attention on the road then. Don't kill us both. Just drive. I told you I'll tip you. Cash." The young woman pulled a thick wad of cash out of her jeans pocket and waved the wad in his direction. "Just get me home. Remember, models deserve rides too."

“I’ll get you home safely,” he said, slowing the speed markedly. “Don’t worry, I drive full time. I can drive and still tell you that you’re the prettiest girl I’ve ever had in my car. See, I’m not looking at you. Eyes on the road, but I gotta ask. How do you get your hair so straight like that. It’s perfect like out of a movie.”

The young woman gave no response and instead tapped a button on the mobile to place a phone call. “George, can you prepare a cocktail. The drive home is treacherous and lecherous and I’m in need of gallons of vodka. Be home in 15 minutes or so.”

“Traacherous and lecherous,” the driver repeated, smiling at her in the rearview. “Wait, does that make me the lecherous part. I didn’t say nothing bad, what are *you* thinking about?”

“I’m thinking about murders and executions so be careful how you speak to me. I’ve hacked men into bits for less. Still want to tell me how pretty I am? Make my day. As for my hair, if you ever learn that secret, it’ll mean your life.”

He whistled and for a moment became silent. The car passed Uxbridge High School and the driver maintained a very low speed as there were no other cars on the road.

“The fact you had to say all that instead of just telling me no means you’re interested. I like when girls play hard to get. Makes the getting all the sweeter.”

The car stopped at the 146A merge with 122. The Uxbridge Courthouse parking lot was almost completely empty. Court was finished for the day, closed early for the storm. Taking a left onto 122 N, the driver guided the car carefully over the thickening ice.

“More treacherous than lecherous so far if you ask me.” The driver slowed the speed to less than 25 mph. The only other vehicles to be seen were plows and town trucks sanding the roads.

The blonde woman laughed and placed her mobile in her lap. “You are quite persistent. If I told you I was a serial killer would you still want to fuck me?”

The driver pondered her question and approached the stoplight to RT 16.

“Are you a serial killer?”

“I am,” she responded immediately.

The driver whistled and turned onto RT 16, glancing at the app on his phone. Less than half a mile to Ella’s house.

“I don’t care. You can be anything you want to be with me. If you want to identify as a serial killer, have at it.”

Ella sighed and leaned forward, “Look for the driveway after the fire hydrant. No, not that one. The next.”

The driver pulled to a skidding stop in the driveway, tires slipping dangerously on the ice. “We made it.”

Ella peeled several bills from the cash wad and extended the money over the seat to the driver. “A serial killer keeps her promises.”

“Wow,” the driver said, quickly counting the money. “You gave me five hundred dollars. This makes my year.”

“I want something for my money. Pretend you never took this ride. You never saw me. You’ll never speak about it.”

The driver shrugged and stuffed the money into a pocket. "It's going to be hard not to mention the tip and a rider telling me she's a serial killer, but it's your ride. Thanks for the tip, *serial killer*."

Ella signed once more, closing her eyes.

"Do me a favor. Google my name. Ella Thomas."

The driver tapped at his mobile and waited for the internet to return an answer. His face grew pale and he looked at Ella in the rearview.

"I...hope you have a n...nice night," he stammered as he swiped at the app screen to end the ride.

"Don't you want to come inside. I'll tell you every detail about my hair routine. I promise it's to die for..." Ella's voiced trailed off into a smile.

The driver gulped for air and wiped at sweat collecting on his forehead. "The roads are getting bad; I better get going. Maybe...another time..."

He didn't finish, voice fading into nothingness.

"Come inside. You only live once; every day could be your last ride."

The driver attempted to speak but failed, his face getting paler, eyes wide staring at Ella in the rearview.

"Call me Donald," he finally answered.

"Do you mind if I light a cigarette, Donald. It's been one hell of a stressful day."

He nodded his consent even though he never let riders smoke in the car. But a serial killer that tipped \$500? The smell of smoke filled the car before Ella cracked open the window.

"Don't worry about the roads. If it's too bad later, you can stay with me. You'll be safe, I swear. Come inside for vodka martinis."

"I..." Donald stammered again.

Ella opened the door and flicked the cigarette into the snowbank. Lifting the hood of her coat to block the wind and sleet, she stepped into the winter weather. “Come inside. We can get drunk and make a book together. I’ll make you famous.”

Donald remained silent and still behind the steering wheel. He gave no indication he heard Ella speak. She sighed and shuffled carefully around to the driver’s door. Pulling at the handle, she opened the door. Ella offered her hand to Donald and waited for him to speak or move or somehow answer.

“Don’t be afraid, you only die once,” she whispered into his ear. A chill ran down his spine and goosebumps popped on his arms and the back of his neck. Donald put his hand into hers.

“Ok, but I’m not really into books. I just want to show you I’m not afraid. I’m not. I will...”

Ella placed a finger on his lips, stopping him.

“Don’t make promises you won’t keep. Don’t tell me you’ll make me forget my name or I’ll get dick owned or any of the other shit you men say. Just don’t.”

He nodded yes and Ella led him from the car.

“I want you to know it’s whatever I decide. What you want has nothing to do with it. Be happy and quiet. You’re just a bag of pleasantly arranged flesh and bones to me.”

Ella approached the kitchen door along the side of the house. The door swung open, but Donald couldn’t see anyone in the kitchen when he followed Ella inside.

“George,” Ella said to the empty room, shedding her coat and boots and kitted scarf onto the island table in the middle of the room. “Two martinis followed by dinner service.”

“Who are you talking to?” Donald asked, confused.

“My butler.” Ella stripped the rest of her wet clothes and stood naked in the kitchen, spinning in a slow circle to give Donald a show.

At that moment an elderly gentleman wearing a tuxedo and carrying a drink tray with two martinis entered the room. He served the drinks and with a bow, made a prompt exit. But he wasn't gone for more than thirty seconds; he returned with a robe that he placed around Ella's shoulders.

“Will the gentleman be needing accommodations tonight? I'll ready the guest room. It's quite the storm out there.” George waited for Ella to answer, but she was busy with the martini. “If there's anything else you require, Ella, do let me know.”

With another bow, George took his leave.

“I can't believe you have a butler.”

Ella clucked her tongue at him, wagging a finger. “You just saw me naked and you're caught up with the butler? Tsk tsk, Donald.”

She sat on one of the high back stools lining the island in the kitchen. Patting a seat next to her, she motioned for him to join her.

“Tell me about yourself. How old are you for starters?”

“25.”

Ella spit martini onto the table and shook her head. “No, no, that won't due. You said 35, right? Right??? I don't have sex with children younger than me.”

“I'm not a child.”

“25 years old is the first year a man starts being a man. So, yes, you’re a child. Don’t argue with me. It’s not good for your health.”

Donald finished his martini and before he could ask, George whisked into the room and served two more martinis.

“I could get used to butler service. How much do you pay him?”

Ella placed an index finger against Donald’s lips again. “Never ask about money. Stop minding George and start minding me.”

She pulled her robe to the side to give Donald a better view of her legs.

“You promised you’re aren’t scared. Why haven’t you fucked me yet? We’ve been inside almost twenty minutes. Most men would be smashing me for the second time already.”

“I don’t want to die.”

Ella sipped her martini and tapped at her phone. Mozart filled the air, violins dancing in the space his comment left in the room.

“Even if you never truly live, you will still die. Would you be hesitating if I didn’t tell you? Weren’t you all but promising to fuck me...and well at that?”

Donald nodded but turned his eyes from her. Fear made his hands shake and he placed the martini on the granite island countertop to keep from dropping it.

“Tell me the truth. Do any men leave here alive?”

Ella tilted her head as if trying to remember. “In Uxbridge? In the house where I killed my father? I don’t know...”

Donald closed his eyes, his body shaking visibly. Ella placed a hand on his thigh, and he jumped on the bar stool.

“You’re scared like a schoolgirl. Is this your first time? Are you a virgin, Donald?”

He shook his head in the negative but didn’t speak or look at her.

“Not to tell you how this is done, but you have to put hands on me. Are you too scared to do this?”

Ella leaned into his body and placed the palm of his hand on her knee. Dragging his hand higher, she pushed under the robe, pressing his fingers into her thighs as if giving him instructions by touch.

“I don’t want to die,” he repeated.

She sighed and finished her second martini. Pulling the robe open a little more, she inched closer to him. “Are you guilty?”

“Guilty?” he asked, eyes finally locking on to hers. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Would the women that have known you say that?”

He stammered an answer she couldn’t understand, blurting out a string of words that didn’t combine coherently into sentences.

Ella began to repeat her question, but George entered the room and took a spot against the wall.

“What is it, George?”

“Your guest passed the FBI background check. He’s got a clean record. Almost Boy Scout clean. No priors, no pending cases.” George readied another round of martinis as if the information he’d just given was of no consequence.

Donald put a hand over his chest, as if to try stilling the rapid beating of his heart. He watched Ella jump from her stool and tie the robe around her waist, the clock ticking and ticking. Blood pounded his temples, a drumbeat almost matching time with the grandfather clock. Ella extended a hand towards him, a simple invitation; to what he knew not.

Putting one shoe on the floor, he managed to stand despite waves of fear and nausea sweeping over his body. He drained the martini in one gulp and took a confident first step in Ella's direction.

"What did you say? You only die once?"

Ella glanced at him over her shoulder. "Just the once."

Donald followed her into the bedroom, the hallway floorboards creaking and under his weight. The moment he crossed the threshold, Ella slammed the door, plunging them both into darkness.