



Where My Neighbors Crush Ice

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I.

I find the woman next to the elevator without teeth. Her right hand holds a mallet, left hand grips a tied grocery bag. Hair is matted into fine lines around her eyes, which flutter like fruit flies in gray fluorescents. My mother has given me a ride from the other side of town, so the woman and I wait for her to go up.

In the elevator, my mother turns to the woman, “How’s your night?” “Fine, fine, fine, fine,” she says, and something falls from her mouth. My mother picks it up. There’s a familiarity about this woman I will commit to memory, a softness to her burning.

“I didn’t catch what she said,” I say, unlocking my door. “She said she’s spoiled and likes crushed ice,” my mother tells me. “Oh.” We step inside. “She couldn’t do that in her own fucking kitchen?” I ask. My mother looks at me, angles her mouth downward, and lifts her shoulders slightly.

2.

I visit my brother who tells me he wants to watch Patch Adams because he started it in rehab and wasn’t allowed to finish it there. “I want to know the ending,” he says. I tell him, “I’ve seen it. It’s okay, but we should watch it,” because it hurts me a little, his not knowing. So we turn it on, and he tells me that

our father looks like Robin Williams. “Yeah, a little,” I say, “but I’m sure he’s nicer or he was, was nicer.”

Patch Adams is worse than I remember, and I don’t think it’s as good as my brother remembers either. When I grab the pint of Ben & Jerry’s Chocolate Fudge Brownie from the freezer, I consider how we’ve changed when the movie hasn’t.

Robin Williams is frozen, suspended in front of us but gone, and my brother will always be caught on the edge of an unfinished movie, wanting to return to something that was never whole.

3.

For years my mother worked as a caretaker, looked after the elderly when they could no longer live on their own. She started caretaking when I was in high school and continued into my early twenties. Toward the end, she did it less and less out of necessity. It was like her to take care of people, the way she taught me to take care of my brother in the middle of addiction.

One night, while I drove my mother to work at a residential care facility off the highway, she told me she didn’t want to be alone. I went into the facility with her, took my backpack, and made it to the backroom, where I saw a man whose name I’ve forgotten. He couldn’t breathe on his own. The machine keeping him alive dwarfed his body, and the room’s single piece of furniture, a stained sofa, smelled like rotting wood and crusted nutrition shake. We sat on it, the smell. After visiting hours, I was ushered out of the room by the facility’s manager. I felt guilty leaving my mother there, the man’s mouth gaping and lungs clouded as a starless sky.

4.

I take out the trash when I get home. I’ve let the can flood over for a few days because feline-sized rats fill the alleyway where the Dumpsters are. One way to the alleyway is through a room that houses exactly one half-working treadmill. Next to it, I find an open can of peaches with a plastic spoon tucked inside. Someone was eating here; maybe they’ll come back for it.

There's a sad practicality to canned fruit, of trying to keep something past its death.

The other way to the alleyway is from the street. Tonight is warm and clear, so is the alleyway. I walk through to the front of the building. Perched in the alcove between the door and elevator is a man squatting barefoot with a hammer across his toes. In front of him is a tied grocery bag.

I say, "Hi," and he says, "Hold the elevator," so I do, and he uncurls himself from the corner, grabs the hammer, and follows me. His cheeks are sunken, eyes black and expansive. I've seen the look before—my brother once punched through a car window in one blow. Glass shattered around our driveway. His whole body went up into the air, shadowed his fist as he plummeted back down toward the ground with speed he didn't know he possessed. That has to be ice in the man's bag, and how much damage he could do with a hammer.

"Have a good night," he says, staring at the ceiling of the elevator.

5.

The distance between anger and rage is the same distance between sadness and grief, the interspace starved enough to eat anything.

6.

Strawberries were the first fruit to ripen in spring. My grandmother had a large patch of them in the corner of her yard, watermelon too. I spent most of my childhood with her, watching her cook and smoke and laugh with her lips pressed together. She hated the way her teeth looked. When my grandmother laughed too hard, she'd move her long, painted nails in front of her mouth to hide her teeth. Sometimes, we couldn't wait for the strawberries to turn from green, so we'd roll the hard fruit in sugar from a crystal bowl. Lid removed, I stuck wet fingers in the white.

At the end of spring, my grandmother made strawberry preserves, boiled the berries in sugar, then jarred them. Later we ate it on Wonder Bread. The fruit was good that way but different than eating it straight from the ground.

At home, my brother ate Cosmic Brownies and Cheetos, the orange powder the color of his hair. I'd find brownie wrappers everywhere, in the bathroom we shared and under couch cushions. He consumed at least one box of plastic-wrapped, pre-cut brownies a week. He'd sometimes leave half of one on a wrapper somewhere as something waiting for him.

7.

The first time I drove my brother to rehab he had just turned 18 and told me he wanted to die. That attempt at rehabilitation came in the form of a psychiatric unit, where he was stripped and put in the drug wing of the facility, a sort of suspension. I sat in the waiting room replaying the ways our father made us feel our own bodies, and my mother went to buy three cartons of Marlboro Reds so that my brother wouldn't run out, wouldn't crave as much.

Another mother at the front desk brought a stuffed dinosaur to her son, "It's his favorite. He'll be missing it." The worker, without specifying, told the mother it would be a risk.

Years later, after nearly dying from an overdose, my brother found Fred. When we were children, my brothers were gifted matching teddy bears for Christmas because they're twins, and back then, everything had to be the same between them. The other bear is Ted, with one less letter and more wear.

My mother called a few weeks ago to say my brother, who is 22 now, found Fred and Ted in the top corner of his closet and placed Fred's worn paw neatly over Ted's. "He didn't tell me he found them," she said. "When I asked him about it, he said they should be together."

8.

My mother never got used to it, the dying. It always got to her.

9.

A man wobbles up the street with a case of Natural Ice. In the background, kids are dropped off by a school bus. The man drops his case on the sidewalk and leans against someone's fence. A second man runs from across the street with a

golf putter, more a symbol than an actual threat. None of the kids look. The second man starts swinging. A car pulls over. A boy emerges, shoves a gun in the front of his jeans, and takes the side of the man with the putter. Together, they remove the man but not the ice, which spills across the pavement. A schoolgirl puddles through the slush, kicks a loose can into the grass.

How easy it is for her to look the other way while I watch from my car. The same way it was easier to pretend I didn't see a machete sticking out of a woman's cargo pocket on the elevator, her face bruised and a plastic cup of whiskey crooked in her arm. I stepped onto the spilled alcohol without looking down, which was also the way I looked the other direction when my father ran to the toilet to throw up everything in his stomach, then crawled to the fridge for another beer, vomit caked to his shirt.

Sometimes, when he was a happy drunk, his smile did look a little like Robin Williams.

10.

Some summers my mother worked at an out-of-school program that supplied lunches for students: peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, oranges, milk cartons, carrot sticks. When there was hot food, she drove pans of leftovers to a camp tucked in a wooded patch beneath the highway. She talked to a man there: Dan, a name I remember. She gave him hand sanitizer and chicken nuggets until he got sick. Then she took Seagram's 7, figured it would help numb whatever it was that needed quieting. I went with her once to take the liquor. Dan shook my hand with both of his, as if we knew one another, as if he were glad to see me. The last time my mother went, he was gone. The others in the camp said Dan had died. Maybe he froze to death. When one man became violent, my mother stopped going.

11.

Last year, my brother passed out in the shower. My father found him covered in his own shit, called an ambulance, and left. When I arrived at the hospital, my brother was alone with a nurse who said she couldn't do anything for him, to take him to a different hospital, somewhere equipped for handling withdrawal. What she meant to say, as we stood in the back of the ER where my brother

sprawled naked on a cot in a room the size of a closet, was that his type of illness wasn't going to be treated at a hospital right outside the suburbs.

When my mother and I transported him, my brother's body convulsed in the back of the car. Every few miles, my mother would stop to wipe his legs and back, to make sure he was still breathing—the way she had done before.

12.

I didn't remember the opening scene of *Patch Adams*, when Patch is in a psychiatric hospital wearing slippers because shoelaces and stuffed animals are hazards. I guess that's why the film was played in rehab—an attempt at holding up some sort of mirror. But my brother wasn't allowed to finish it, and he wanted to know how it would all pan out. So did I. That created its own kind of yearning, and now I'm left with the image of Patch in a hospital gleaming an ingenuine grin as though it were all a ploy, as if our father believed that leaving my brother for paramedics was like turning off a movie.

13.

When I see the ice lady coming in from outside, I hold the elevator for her. She has teeth in her mouth and is wearing eyelashes, a wig, and a tight dress. Her lipstick matches the tattoo of a berry-red kiss high on her neck. The perched man enters with her, arms full of groceries and toiletries. I can't tell if this is an exchange, but the woman looks at me and smiles. Maybe it is sweet, I think, the way they could be taking care of one another. Where my neighbors crush ice, next to the elevator or nestled inside their car, is where the smell of cat piss and nail polish remover lingers. Sometimes, it's where the distance between the door and elevator stretches wide, fills with half bodies and peaches.

This time, the man and woman don't have tied bags or hammers. It's strange how we try to piece together endings and imagine people as they aren't, until we can't. I think we understand each other, my brother and I. When he says Patch reminds him of our father, what my brother means to say is that he wanted our father to be there. And when I slide past the woman on my way out of the elevator, I think I might not have recognized her if it weren't for her coal-wide eyes.