

Popsicles and Cigarettes

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It was a summer embedded in the time when hymns were still sung at church to move the congregation. You didn't sit still, watching the song leader's mouth open and close on meaningless mouthfuls of syllables, you jumped up out of your pew and spouted the praise of Jesus. Dad always brought these praises home to us, leading our family in a scattered choir, voices coming from every room. It didn't matter that my mom couldn't carry a tune; he led us anyway through the chorus and every verse of the old worship songs. I remember clearly these mornings in our home, but even more, I can remember the summer when my dad stopped leading.

We started that summer on the high of freedom. We ate Jolly Ranchers all day because there was no one to give us oral vocabulary quizzes. We conquered every tree we came across with our jumbled messes of uncombed hair, teeth still holding on to the candy from last night escapades and the sticky afterthought of lemonade on our hands. We were discovering new things that summer. That willow trees made great clubhouses for boys that want to escape the laundry filled arms of our mothers and the fake marriage ceremonies of the girls in the neighborhood. That the older couple a few houses down had a zip line in their back yard that they would let us ride. That Randy Wieb could get cigarettes from his dad's car one at a time, building our collection till all five of us had one to smoke. We were 12, but as the prospect of smoking came to us we began to see ourselves as much older. Cigarettes carried an unprecedented weight in the tiny rolled up paper. Between the tobacco and the filter there was enough rebellion that we began to wonder what we needed our parents for anyway.

That summer was, like most others, devoid of dads and some moms, like ours who had jobs other than teaching school.

We thought we were all the same. We all liked the Rangers, hated the Redskins, and thought the farther you could spit the more of a man you were. I was quieter than the rest. Most of the time when an argument boiled about whether or not the Cowboys would win any games this year I would sit and listen to the statistics rattled off faster than the multiplication table ever would be and wondered at the speed with which my best friend could close an argument. Josh lived a street over in a two-story house that had been built more than 50 years ago. It had really cool trap doors in the side of the walls that, to our disappointment, had been pointed out by the real estate agent to his parents and were therefore now off limits.

It seems grossly under thought to me now, but back then I judged wealth by the literal temperature of a person's house. If their house was extremely cold on a day when the high was 101°, I assumed they were rich. Our family's houses were always lukewarm. Not uncomfortably hot, but not unnecessarily cool.

We all went to church together, too. Ridgecrest Church of Christ. It was an extremely conservative congregation and most of the members were what our preacher condemned as "Sunday Christians." All of our families attended church, but I'm not sure if all of us sitting there on the pews believed in it. The five of us managed to stay fairly silent during service, but during Bible class we made spitballs, gave wet willies and passed vicious "I wouldn't go out with you even if..." notes to all the girls. My parents, of course, loved church. They dressed up, my dad in corduroys and tasseled dress shoes and my mom in broom skirts and Sunday sandals. They played gospel songs on the way to church in our gray Plymouth van and sang the songs from service on the way home. My family was never really without some singing going on.

Randy was the leader of our group, I suppose. We never would have admitted it then, but we all looked up to him. He was smart but he was starting to find more functional ways to use his intelligence other than state mandated standardized tests. He's the one that found out about the zip line and the one that convinced Mr. and Mrs.

Elleger that we should be able to use it. He was also the one that told Garrett not to try it one-handed right before Garrett broke his left arm.

Garrett was the closest to a bully that we had in our group. He usually saved it for the girls or a few boys that lived on the edge of our neighborhood who dared to show up at our hangouts every once in a while. Sometimes, though, we had to shove him out of the willow tree after he called someone a putz one too many times that day or gave an uncalled for dead-leg.

We all had been friends for so long that we saw nothing unusual about our group even though we had Kyle in our midst. Kyle was tall. Freakishly tall. He ran slow and always ducked his head as if there was always something over him that he might hit if he stood up straight. He smelled like herbs constantly and no matter how many new pairs of glasses he got they always seemed crooked. We responded to his strange stories and unusual comments with a flippant, "Aw, shut up Kyle."

That day we had been walking down the alley searching for girly magazines in the dumpsters down the street where the college guys lived. Our search turned up only thirst in more ways than one, so we headed to my house to see if my mom had remembered to make Kool-Aid that morning. As we neared the corner I was lagging behind, walking next to Kyle. Josh stopped when he reached the corner and turned around accusingly.

"You didn't tell us your dad would be home."

My stride broke a bit as I paused to realize he was talking to me.

"I didn't tell you because I didn't know, dimwit."

"Well you go first to find out why he's home. If he's sick or something I don't want to get reamed out for no reason."

Everyone mumbled a cowardly agreement with Randy.

I headed up the driveway towards our light blue house and pulled open the screen door, surprised that the front door was open.

Our house was one story with three bedrooms and two bathrooms, one of the latter for my parents and one for my sister and me to share. Our house was always clean

and bright. When we were looking for a house my mom insisted over and over that we have “natural light.” It wasn’t enough that it had the fireplace that she wanted, or the large bedrooms, or lots of shelving to display her numerous trinkets. She needed windows. Lots of windows.

I began to make my way down the hall, the wooden floorboards giving away my whereabouts in the house.

“Dad?” It seemed a feeble way to begin my quest to secure the house for our own rowdy pleasures, but my confusion at the circumstances kept me from being inquisitive too quickly.

He was sitting at the kitchen table in his Saturday clothes which featured gray drawstring shorts like the kind they made us buy for P.E. at school. He didn’t have a shirt on, and it was when I saw the sweat drops threatening to drip from his forehead to the papers scattered around him that I took first note of how hot it was in the house.

“Hey, Pops. What are you doing home?”

“I don’t have lunch ready. Your mother told me you boys would scrounge something up yourself.” His voice wasn’t impatient yet, but there was something in it that I wasn’t used to hearing. The voice wasn’t sad or angry; it sounded like how I felt when my team had counted on me to get a good hit to win the baseball game and I struck out. It’s the same voice I now use when I fail to do something that I know my wife or kids really want from me. It’s that voice that carries the weight of disappointing those around you that you care about.

I wanted to test a little further, seeing as he wasn’t angry with my questions this far.

“Will you be home all day?”

This seemed to trigger something in him that I had not wanted to awaken. He looked up from his papers and saw me this time and his tongue sharpened his words as they formed.

“Yes, Ryan. Now go, I have too much to do to keep answering these questions. Go!”

I walked dejectedly outside, and I could tell the guys knew right away that we were banned from the house that day.

“Cool. Everyone search your pockets for change and we’ll walk over to Superette and get something from the machine. We can just split it.”

Josh’s mention of the small grocery store cheered us up. Sometimes if we went over to buy something the owner, an older man, who was freakishly tall like Kyle, would give us popsicles for free.

We began walking and Josh waited to walk beside me.

“So what did he say? I mean did he yell at you? Was he asleep or something?”

I knew Josh wasn’t asking to be nosey; he was just opening up the conversation so I could tell him if I wanted.

I concentrated for a minute on the scabs on the back of Garrett’s legs, listening to the sounds of our Chucks on the street, deciding if I wanted to talk.

“Nah, he wasn’t sleeping or sick or nothing. He was just there. Home. Weird huh?”

My steps got quicker and I could feel Josh hesitate beside me and then speed up, making a joke about Garrett’s cast loud enough for him to hear and I knew he considered the conversation was over.

We got our Dr. Peppers and our free popsicles and sat on the curb, using the syrupy state of the melting popsicles to drown ants in puddles of bright green and orange.

Randy threw his popsicle stick across the street and stood up quickly, the look in his eyes telling us that something big was coming.

“Well, boys, I did it.”

We stared at him expectantly, not wanting to be the first to ask “What?” for fear of looking too eager.

Kyle spoke first. “Well, captain, out with the news.”

“I’ve got something hidden and I think you’ll like it. Today, we smoke.”

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We didn't smoke that day. On our way to the hiding place of the cigarettes we all got called in for dinner and that night Kyle's parents went to the hospital. His mom had gone into labor with his little sister who then died during birth. It seemed so strange to us that she would be carrying that baby around for so many months to bring nothing home wrapped in a pink blanket. Nothing alive and crying to show for all the waiting and the big fuss.

The temperature in my house hadn't gotten any cooler. My dad had been home every day and pretty soon it became obvious to my friends that he wasn't working. Our house was no longer the safe haven for play that it had been. Without the air conditioner running it was hot and my dad was short tempered. In the mornings he slept and it was around noon before I would see him walk outside to get the paper in his Saturday clothes. There was no use anymore in him keeping track of the days, they all went the same way for him. I heard my parents talking at night, not fighting, but not the tender voices I was used to either. The house felt like it had been cut up into small pieces. We woke up in the mornings and there was no "Our God is an Awesome God" resounding from the walls. My sister had dance and my mom had work and I had willow trees and zip lines and my dad had his newspapers and his talk radio.

My mom worked later and later that summer, telling us that dinner was my dad's job now because she needed more hours to keep us floating. As a kid that idea sounded so strange to me. Floating through our life. It seemed like my parents weren't the kind of people to float, they were the kind to swim ferociously. They were they kind to build a boat and throw parties with their friends. But I began to see us floating.

A few days before the Fourth of July I decided to talk to my mom about our plans for the holiday. Usually we had a huge celebration in our backyard, but I knew my mom hadn't been feeling festive.

"Hey, Mom. What're we doin' for the Fourth? I was hoping we could go over to Garrett's house. They're gonna have a cookout and all that, Mom."

She pushed her glasses up into her hair and rubbed her eyes, giving them a break from reading the fine print on the back of the credit card statements.

“Ryan, I don’t know that we will feel like celebrating.”

I knew that she wasn’t going to feel like hosting a party, but it came as a surprise to me that she didn’t want to celebrate at all. Not only did she like parties, she was incredibly patriotic, so I knew that things were worse off in her life than I had imagined.

There were a few days that summer when I felt like my friends couldn’t understand. Like if I tried to talk about it I would get the face that appeared when grown-ups tried to talk to us about personal responsibility, self discipline or the need for dress shoes. On those days I escaped my house before Josh showed up on my front lawn. It must have been three times that I went to Mr. Elleger’s house alone before he came out to talk to me.

I was sitting in his backyard, humming church songs under my breath and shredding the leaves lying on the ground, their green life leaking out in bits of juice all over my hands. He walked through the back door and stood for a minute. I knew he was there, but I just waited. Adults always liked to talk first.

“Where’s your group of buddies?”

Mr. Elleger was a nice man. He and his wife were in their early sixties with grown kids and growing grandkids. They liked to have us in their backyard, they told our parents that when we faced skepticism about using their zip line. They attended Ridgecrest, too.

“Dunno. Didn’t feel like playin home-run derby this morning.”

“I see. Haven’t seen you and your folks at church the past few Sundays. Everything going alright, Ryan?”

“Yes, sir.”

He didn’t say anything, just stood there, asking me everything without asking me anything else, just like Josh did.

“I mean Dad lost that job and all. It’s not like he ain’t looking. He tells us that all day. He tells us that it wasn’t right, him getting fired so the boss’ nephew could work

there. And it wasn't you know? I just think if he would sing again, it would get better. He used to sing, in the mornings, in the shower, cleaning up after dinner. We all sang Jesus songs together. I just think if he sang again, maybe he would be okay. It would get better."

I guess I knew Mr. Elleger wouldn't know what to say. I guess I just needed to say it to someone, to tell someone what I wanted from this summer. I didn't want to win the most races, stick the most spitballs in Sadie Starkey's hair or even smoke my first cigarette as much as I wanted my family to sing together again.

"You're right son. I bet a few songs is all it would take."

He hooked his left thumb into his belt loop and offered me his right hand. I grabbed it and stood up next to him. He stood for a moment, just looking at the yard as if he expected it to be different now than it was yesterday.

"You know I built this yard with its contraption for my grandkids. Only, they've only been out here once in the past five years. Sometimes it doesn't matter what you plan on in your life, son. You just have to build what you can and wait for something good to come of it."

I shrugged, knowing that a kid didn't have answers to an adult problem. I began to look around the yard, noticing for the first time all the details that a kid would enjoy. There was a plastic turtle shaped sandbox, a swing set, a tire swing. He had even nailed pieces of rubber on the edges of the wooden stairs leading to the front door so the kids wouldn't get hurt if they fell. There were never any stickers in the green grass, which was a feat for a west Texas yard, and the trees gave the perfect amount of shade. Mr. Elleger had spent a lot of time on this yard. I wondered when his grandkids would have the chance to see it.

The walk back to my house didn't seem long enough to give me time to clear my head. Before I knew it I was combating Garrett's claims that he was ahead in our summer-long home run derby contest.

I left it all behind me when I was with the guys. It didn't seem like it was important enough to talk about yet, and I knew they got the big picture. Dad wasn't working.

Garrett had attempted to bring up the subject once during the entire summer.

"Do you remember when Esteban's dad started staying home during the day? Wouldn't it be shitty if all that stuff happened to you?"

I knew what he was getting at and had been thinking along the same lines recently, but Josh's anger at the question surprised me.

"Don't be a putz, Garrett. Do you wanna get another broken arm?"

Esteban had been one of our buddies two years ago, but his family had moved away when his dad lost his job. He wasn't one of our core group members, but he had lizards for pets and his mom always gave us a package of Oreos to take back to our clubhouse. When he moved it was the first time we ever grasped the concept of our group being broken apart. Parents could say one word and there would be no more Kyle, no more Garrett, no more willow trees.

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A few days later we all met in front of the Superette to buy Cokes and some candy. We bought one for each guy in the group with whatever money we had talked out of our parents that morning. We walked down the street and stopped in front of Kyle's house. We had been walking by every day, just in case, but he hadn't been out yet. Today he sat on the porch steps, peeling the paint off of the metal pillars that held up the porch. We didn't say anything, Randy just whistled and Kyle stood up, clomping over to our pack.

"Alright," Randy announced. "It's our last week of summer. I say we go smoke those cigs. In?"

We all laughed in approval and out of relief that there was not going to be a need for an icebreaker with Kyle.

Our journey down the street remains in my head today. Randy was in front, his brown hair buzzed close to his head, the sweat beads visible through the tiny hairs. His

orange "And One" shirt hung limp on his skinny frame and he was yanking his jean shorts up by the belt loops. He, like the rest of us, wore the same pair of black Chucks every day. Garrett walked a little behind Randy. He had thick blonde hair that, once we got to high school, he couldn't keep his hands from running through. He was wearing his dad's old camo hunting shirt and jean cargo shorts. Kyle was next. He wore athletic shorts almost every day, and shirts with strange school logos on them that were hand-me-downs from his cousins. Today's shirt featured a Trojan on a horse. Josh and I were both wearing jean shorts with striped shirts. Our mothers shopped together so often that the last one of us to be picked up by the group sometimes had to go back in and change shirts so we didn't look like sissies. Today my shirt was red and black and his was green and yellow.

We finally arrived at the Elleger's house. Their house was perfect for our first smoke because it was away from any of our houses and the outside of the fence was surrounded by big bamboo type stalks that made for good cover. We all followed Randy as he made his way through the plants and then began counting boards on the fence. He stopped at the seventh board from the corner and stooped down. He had covered a small crayon box with some leaves. He picked it up and dusted it off. We all stood, not watching too closely as he opened it with a flourish to show us that he really did have the cigarettes.

"And I remembered to steal a lighter, too."

"Way to go, genius." My voice carried sarcasm, but I had a feeling that all the other guys felt a relief at Randy's thinking ahead. I certainly hadn't thought about stealing a lighter.

"Who's gonna go first?" Kyle asked.

"I got 'em, I'll smoke 'em." Randy took the first cigarette out of the box and held it up to his lips.

"I've seen dad do this plenty. You just gotta hold the flame up to it and suck on the end to get it lit. Then it's all sucking and puffing."

We watched, this time not caring how intent our stares were. Randy flicked the lighter and it flamed up, catching the end of the cigarette. He puffed once, blowing the smoke out and coughing a little. We all laughed and Josh began to make a crack when we heard Mr. Elleger's voice.

"Boys, what are you doing back there? You getting into some kind of trouble on my property?"

Our eyes widened and we all tossed our cigarettes down. Randy took one more drag off of the cigarette, assuring some bonafide bragging rights for later, then he threw his down too and ran.

We hightailed it outta there. We stopped only when we got to my house, collapsing in the driveway, half laughing and half panting.

We joked for a few minutes, ragging on each other about who got scared first and most. That's when we saw the smoke. It was not much at first, just a thin black snake curling up into the sky. Within minutes it became a billowing black column and we decided we better go check it out.

The fire truck barely beat us there and we watched the men unravel the hoses and begin to blast the flames with strong pulses of water. The fire was out in a matter of minutes, but the damage was the kind that lasts. As the smoke and people cleared we saw the backyard. The fire burned the fence first, then the bamboo-like stalks, then the trees that held up the zip line and all the bushes and other trees in the backyard. The firefighters got to it before it reached the house.

It was shocking to see so much black in the daytime, such darkness in the sunlight. Everything was charred. The swing set was just melted plastic, the sandbox was gone, the soft green grass was burnt into nothing. All of Mr. Elleger's hard work was gone.

We made our way back to our houses, each of us going to our own home. It wasn't something we talked about, I just think we all felt like something big had happened to us, like part of our friendship had been tainted. I walked up to my front

door and it was closed. I opened it, confused, and walked inside to see my dad dressed in khakis and a dark blue polo.

“Dad? You have a job interview?”

“Even better. I have a job.” The smile on his face kicked my imagination into gear, wondering he had gotten the job at the hospital that he had wanted for so long. It was hard to imagine an accountant’s dream job back then, but I knew being the CFO of a hospital was his.

“Hold on.” He walked out of the room and came back, his arms spread wide as if he were wearing the trendiest suit on the market. My face must have fallen a bit when my eyes landed on the bright orange Elleger’s Hardware vest. Dad came over to the couch and sat down.

“Bubba, I needed a job. Mr. Elleger knew I needed something, so he gave me this graveyard shift in the stockroom. I’m gonna find something better. Everything will be okay now. Everything will be normal again, soon.”

These words did the opposite of comfort me. I had just burned down the backyard of the man who was giving my father a job. Guilt pressed on my chest like a football team dog pile.

But then as he walked out the door to begin his first day at the hardware store I heard something that excited me more than the crack of a bat or the screaming of spitball covered girls. My dad was humming a familiar church hymn under his breath, one that spoke to me in more ways than one.

I turned around, feeling hopeful for the first time and wanting to share that quietly victorious moment with my mom. She was sitting at the kitchen table, eyes glazed over as she stared at the newspaper, completely unaware of the newfound atmosphere that I was sure was making its way back into our home.

That fall I went to Mr. Elleger’s house every day after school with my friends to help clean up their back yard and put up the new zip line. When I drive down that street now I still remember that summer for everything it was and for everything it wasn’t, for its heat and its silence, for its popsicles and cigarettes.

