On Ice

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It was over 100 degrees out and Mickey turned ten that day. He pouted like a little brat because he thought I forgot, and maybe I did. We left the old folks home and there in the sweltering parking lot I made him promise me. This was one of the few times I bothered to look him in the eye, because it was important. I knelt down and took his head in my hands and pressed hard against his skull.

"You listen to me," I said, "You listening, Mickey?"

Mickey tried nodding, but he couldn't move his head.

"If I ever end up like gramma in there, I want you to promise me something. You promise me. You drive me out to the middle of nowhere and you leave me there and you drive away. Got that?"

"You're hurting me."

"I said promise me, Mickey." And I breathed my cigarette breath onto his face.

"I promise."

I released him and I didn't look him in the eye after that.

It was a moment of weakness and I said, "Good boy."

I saw him smile all big in the corner of my eye.

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Thirty-five years later, Michael drives his father out to the desert for a second time. His car is not like the beat-up truck his father used to have. He keeps the car clean and his feet don't have to crush piles of cigarette cartons when he takes a seat. The car blasts cold air onto cold leather and he worries about his father in the passenger seat, smiling out at the passing orange horizon. Michael half-expects his father to split apart somehow and leak drool and tar all over the upholstery.

He drags up old memories and tells his father about them. He tells his father about the divorce with Sarah and how he has felt clumsy and disconnected since then.

My daughters never call me since they went off to college, Michael says. *But I think they call Sarah.*

His father points at the mountains and says, *Well, it must've taken a lot of work to dig those up.*

Michael glances at his father's face. The skin is relaxed off his skull where it used to be hard and yellow with nicotine and rage.

Those are mountains, Dad, Michael says.

He pulls off the road to a gas station, the last one on the edge to complete isolation. He tells his father to wait and sucks in the Nevada heat on his way into the gas station. Inside, everything is red plastic and fluorescent lighting. At the slushie machine, he fills a cup with cherry slush.

Sugar and water, that's all it is, Michael thinks. *Do you know what that does to teeth?*

Michael is a dentist. His closet is stiff with neutral colors and he drinks health shakes and flosses regularly. He tries to keep his mind and body from rotting; he trains for marathons and just last week he mastered drilling thin blocks of wood and turning them into polished wood pens. In the coming week, he will look for a new hobby to keep him occupied. He doesn't drink alcohol. He doesn't watch television.

The same kid from last time slouches behind the counter, thumbing through a magazine about neon green crotch rockets. Michael places the slushie on the counter and waits for the kid to ring it up. He wants to smack the kid, tell him to stop sucking down sodas and go jogging, go find a real job. Michael tells himself he's a nice guy, he's really a very nice guy. He pays for the slushie. The cup beads with water when he leaves the building.

In the car, he hands his father the slushie. His father looks happy.

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The day I made Mickey promise, I took Mickey to see his gramma at the old folks home. I drove him there and the kid tucked into himself as if scared to touch anything. I didn't think I could raise such a shrimp. But accidents happen and condoms split and it feels so good for a moment. Then you end up with a kid you don't want and a woman gone sour.

I slammed the truck into park near a low building made of yellow stucco.

"You're going to meet your gramma," I told Mickey.

"We aren't going to the movies?"

"We aren't going to the movies what."

"We aren't going to the movies, sir?"

"No."

I told him to move, get out of the truck. I hated this place. I hated this place because it wasn't a nice place; I couldn't afford a nice place. This place was run by ugly little women who wheeled old folks in front of windows and let them rot in the sunshine. They fed the old folks mush. Holidays warranted grocery store pies. Every so often someone arranges some Luau bingo and I went to one of those and, Christ, no wonder those people weren't getting better. Momma'd grown worse, though I didn't tell Mickey because what did it matter? Kids don't need to know that, kids should just be kids and stay out of the way.

The sweaty receptionist recognized me and let us into the "community room." The walls were faggot pink and had drawings of boats and beaches framed in corners. Mickey scrunched his face up and I knew he smelled this place, a dry perfume dressed up so you don't recognize it as urine. I made my way to the semi-circle of couches and rocking chairs and Mickey followed, out of my direct sight. Old folks in rocking chairs sat staring at a TV – an endless parade of Lodge members and war veterans. The TV was still a black-and-white set, for God's sake. I knelt at the fungus yellow couch where Momma sat alone, so fat and deflated you'd swear she was a failed cartoon. I pulled Mickey over and pushed on his shoulder to make him kneel with me.

"Momma," I said, "it's me. This here's your grandson, Momma. His name's Mickey." I hit the back of his head. "Where's your manners?"

"Nice to meet you, ma'am," he said. Momma looked at us, pleased as punch, and I couldn't help but think of the woman she used to be. Through the blue veins along her arms and folds in her neck, it got hard to recognize her as the only good thing in my life. It also got a whole lot easier in a shitty sort of way. She used to make bowls of tapioca and she sent me to my room when Papa came home with his fists tight.

"Well," she said. She didn't understand, and that isn't the worst thing about this kind of old age. The worst is that I could see her frowning a little, like she knew something

was wrong, like there was a stain on her shirt she hadn't noticed but everyone else had.

"You spend time with your gramma," I told Mickey. "You talk to her, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

And then I stood up to go have a smoke and I passed a husk draped in a bathrobe, muttering about Krauts and mud. I hoped Mickey would hear; it would toughen him up. I smoked outside and frowned about Mickey's mother. She left a month ago. She said I drink too much, but she was just the same as me. I told her to take the boy with her, but she didn't. Same as I would have done.

I didn't want to go back to Momma. It didn't seem to matter what I said to her, the words made no difference and she understood nothing anyways. Why bother? But that kind of thinking got me guilty. I was a lot of crummy things, but I wasn't the guy who'd give up on his mother. I finished my last cigarette and went back inside.

Mickey stood next to Momma like he'd been caught with a boner. "I don't know what to do, sir."

A new smell hit me and I looked at Momma, poor Momma. She looked embarrassed too, her chin dipped down into her neck. She shit the couch and, boy, I started yelling for someone to come get her clean. I started cussing, just a string of words that didn't make sense after a while. The old folks watched me yell, their heads turning slow to watch me. Dull yellowed eyes.

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Michael drives his father out to the desert for a third time and tells him:

A long time ago, Eskimos would set their old folks out onto ice floes when times were hard and food ran out. The old folks couldn't contribute, so they were put on ice or thrown in the sea or starved or buried alive in the snow and in the cold. Sometimes, an entire village would pack up and move while the old folks slept. Just imagine waking up to that cold. You'd look around and the people you love are gone and you can't recognize anything, the world around you is flat and white and the only color you can find is in the turquoise roots at the edge of the sea. You're shaking and maybe it's the age. The color of your skin goes brown to red until that fades too. You think about the family that left you here. The day before, had your daughters avoided your gaze? How much of a burden were you? You can't think coherently, but you feel these things, some part of you still does. You lie on your back and stare at the sky before you sleep. You try to remember a time when you felt bigger. You turn onto your stomach and crush your face into the snow and ice. Your teeth scream and your marrow thickens and turns blue and you don't feel anything anymore.

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A lady in purple scrubs came by to lead Momma away and clean her. She told me to stop yelling.

"I'll clean the couch," I told her, clenching my teeth. "She's my mother."

The lady looked at me wearily. She was all limbs and wispy black hairs. "Don't bother. We'll just throw it out."

"Let me," I said. I gestured to Mickey to take one end of the couch. "She's my mother."

The lady shrugged and led Momma away and I watched them go before I took the other end of the couch.

"We'll take it through the front," I told Mickey. "Ready?"

When he nodded, I counted down from three and we lifted the couch and it turned out heavier than I thought. We gripped the bottom of the couch. Stray nails bit my palms and some genius managed to get staple ends sticking out down there too. Mickey trembled and struggled to keep his end steady but he kept his face straight and didn't say anything. I didn't tell him good job because I wanted him strong. I let him walk forward while I walked backwards, glaring over my shoulder to see the way. I kicked open the glass doors behind me and we wriggled the couch through the doorway, getting close to the smell. And then we swayed out into the Nevada sun and Mickey was trembling again, red as sin. I barked orders at him and we started a faster pace out here, around the corner of the old folks home and in sight of the simmering parking lot where I would make Mickey promise me.

Nearly fifty feet away from the dumpsters, Mickey dropped his end of the couch, cracking wood against pavement. He gasped and jumped back and some piece tumbled off.

The heat got me. The heat boiled my brain.

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Michael drives his father into the desert for a fourth time and tells him:

Do you remember when I was seven? You and Mom had a party and you sent me to bed early. But I was excited and I couldn't sleep because of my balloon. Mom brought me to the dentist earlier that day and I was scared they'd drill into my jaw. But the dentist was kind, he had big sideburns and a crooked nose. And then he gave me cherry toothpaste and tied a balloon to my wrist. It was red with fat white letters on it. Do you remember that? I stared up at the balloon, watched it bob against the ceiling. I was so happy and proud, I got up to show you. You and Mom and your friends greeted me in the living room with shouts, you were happy to see me, you were drunk. You picked me up and sat me on your lap and laughed smoke. You took your cigarette and pressed it against the balloon and you and Mom and everyone laughed and laughed. Remember?

His father smiles uncertainly. *Oh*, he says, *well.*

So Michael turns up the air conditioning and tells his father again about the divorce, how bad it had been. He and Sarah ended up hating each other after the kids left for college and pulled away that last buffer between them.

We were too different, he tells his father, *or too similar. She told me I was stuck in the past and I told her it doesn't work that way, the past sticks to you, it changes as you change. When your neighbor called to tell me how you were and I hadn't spoken to you in fourteen years, I don't know. Sarah wanted you in a rest home. She told me to just let go. It was sad, she said, but you weren't worth the effort. I lifted my hand to hit her but our marriage ended before that, I guess.*

Michael drives in silence for a while.

Well, his father says. He sips at his slushie.

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I threw down my end of the couch and grabbed at the armrest and pulled.

"God."

I dragged the couch a couple of feet. And the couch tipped onto its back.

"Damn."

I kicked the bottom of the couch and pounded my fists onto the wood paneling. The nails and those staple ends stabbed my skin.

"Couch."

I was the only one. The woman left, and all that was left was me and the boy and some godawful fear running its fingers down my ribs. I couldn't do anything. I wasn't supposed to have a kid. Momma wasn't supposed to end up a brainless sack. I wasn't supposed to end up like my old man.

I couldn't budge one little couch. I sat on the pavement and stared at it. What little damage I did.

"Sir?" Mickey said. He hadn't moved from the spot where he dropped his end of the couch. He was not so far away.

"Sir?"

I stared at the couch and I thought, I should get Mickey something for his birthday. Doesn't really matter what, I guess, just something. Maybe, I thought, after this, I'll drive him over to a gas station and grab him a slushie or something. I'll get some

cigarettes for me.

"Dad?"

I needed a smoke.

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Michael drives his father out to the desert and takes a turn off the main road. Rocks make small chirps against the body of his car and his father looks out the window at the rising dust. He pulls up to a hiking trail that isn't used much anymore; there are rocks here but nothing beautiful and no ancient petroglyphs for tourists to touch. He parks the car, unbuckles his father, and takes the slushie from him to fit it in the cup holder.

He goes out toward the rocks and checks the sparse shade for snakes and scorpions. Satisfied that there are none, he returns to the car and helps his father out.

I'm going to leave you here for a bit, Michael says. *For a bit, okay?*

His father says, *Well, okay.*

And Michael leads his father over to the rock his father likes most. Then he leaves his father to sit in the sun and he returns to the car. He has performed this ritual several times. Michael starts the car and drives away. The first time, he couldn't even do that. He had sat in the car for twenty minutes, watching his father watch him. Then he got out and brought his father back.

The second time, he drove away but drove back in a matter of ten minutes. The third time, he forced himself to wait half an hour before returning. He had spent that half-hour parked in the middle of nowhere, his head pressed against the steering wheel and one foot tapping against the brake pedal. He waited an hour last time and this time he could wait two.

Michael parks on the side of the road. He grips the steering wheel and tells himself one more hour, I'll wait here just one more hour. He thinks about his daughters who don't look away from the blue glow of their cell phones. Maybe he would call and see if they would listen to him talk about the past. He would ask about their lives.

One more hour, he tells himself. Then I'll drive back to him. I'll pull up to him and he'll give me that puzzled smile, the one he uses when he's trying to figure out who I am. One more hour, and I'll come back and pull right up to him. I'll get out and open the passenger side door for him. I'll tell him I'm his son and I'll look him in the eye and hold out the melted slushie he didn't finish.

And my father will be the happiest he's ever been to see me.