

## Doing Lines Back and Forth

I was supposed to drive down from the city to mow my Mom's grass, but her friend's basement flooded. Her friend Smokey's basement. Everything was wet and fucked. The carpet, the couches, the treadmill piled with junk.

Smokey was crying in the garage when I showed up. My Mom hugged her and she cried and cried. She put her head on my Mom's shoulder, cigarette dangling out the side of her mouth and kept on crying. I found out later that Smokey had to put her Mom in hospice two days earlier. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. And sometimes they happen a lot.

Smokey's real name is Cheryl but everyone at the hospital calls her Smokey because she smokes a lot. Nicknames don't need to be clever.

I went down to the basement and Smokey's husband, Bob, was taking pictures for the insurance. He pointed his phone at the carpet, the couches, the treadmill piled with junk. Everything smelt musty and damp. Click click click his thumb went on the phone. The shelves of books lining the walls, the soggy brown boxes of Christmas decorations.

"I needa get it all," Bob said. "Needa get every dollar."

"You got valuables down here, Bob?"

"Nah this is all junk."

"Cool."

I started grabbing whatever was close and carrying it up the stairs. I moved stuff from the basement to the living room. I carried one box up the stairs. And I carried another box. I carried random stuff not in boxes up the stairs. I did this for like an hour.

This is some stuff I carried: winter coats, bathroom rugs, bags of clothes, folding chairs, folding tables, metal signs, stacks of wood, fishing poles, baseball bats, lamps, candles, clocks, boots, gloves, candles, a mini whiteboard, and a shit ton of candles.

I thought about what I'd be doing if it hadn't rained. Mowing grass, just doing lines back and forth. Back and forth.

I'd do the front yard first because it was more complicated with trees and landscaping. Plus the driveway. You always want your east to west lines to match up on either side of the driveway. Not matching up your east and west lines is the sign of an amateur. My Mom doesn't care, but I do. That's me looking out for her. My dear Mother, who says: "get whatever beer you want and put it on my card" and tries to give me her credit card even though all I drink is High Life from the bottle and have for years, Mom.

Well that's what I'd be doing if not for the rain. But it rained so here I was. Here I am. Here we we're.

Doing lines back and forth.

Sweat popped on my forehead and under my arms. My boots sloshed in the rain water that had invaded their basement. I plopped a soggy box down in the living room. It was getting crowded with junk already and there was still a lot left down stairs. This wasn't going to work.

"Smokey," I said, "We needa get a storage unit. Like a POD."

She looked at the stacks of crap in her living room. She considered the boxes of the crap and unboxed crap downstairs. Then she said, "You're right."

So I called the storage unit places. The first place I called was closed. When I called the second place their phone just kept ringing. When I called the third place, they answered by the name of the second place. Eventually I got one to be delivered in a couple hours. In the mean

time I started moving the junk from the living room to the garage. The soggy boxes started falling apart. Disintegrating into sloppy nothing.

“Smokey,” I said, “We need bins.”

She looked at the soggy boxes disintegrating into nothing. She considered the loose junk still downstairs. Then she said, “You’re right.”

I said: “I needa go to Menards.”

I love Menards. I always save big money when I shop there. They always have what I’m looking for and the aisles are wide and well-marked. I happened to find myself down the one with the air compressors.

They were on sale. I’d been price checking compressors for weeks. You have no idea. An air compressor is useful for a lot of things. Inflating stuff. Filling stuff with air. Powering a nail gun. I imagined placing the hose between my lips and filling myself with air. Filling myself more and more until I was crunchy like Rice Krispies. I wanted to be inflated. I wanted to feel full.

Then a little voice in my head said *hey you’re here for storage bins*. So I went to look at the bins. I found some good sturdy ones and bought fifteen.

Doing lines back and forth.

I came back from Menards and Bob was in the garage moving boxes around. I watched him from the edge of the driveway for a bit. He took a box from a stack and carried it to the other side of the garage. Then he moved it a few feet over. Then he muttered something to himself and moved the box again. Then he muttered some more, this time with his hands involved. Oh shit, I thought, Bob’s starting to lose it. Not you too, Bob. You’re my rock. I need you to be strong, Bob. There’s so much war left to fight. Look, I just picked up some bins.

Bob saw me standing there and kind of shook his head. We both knew I'd saw what I'd saw and there was no use saying anything about it.

"I'm no good at this," Bob said.

I set down a stack of bins and started dumping loose candles into one.

"Me either," I said. Then I said: "No one is. No one should want to be."

I could hear Smokey yelling from inside.

Bob said, "Smokey's starting to lose it in there. Probably good to stay out here."

It probably was, but I went inside anyway.

Inside Smokey and my Mom stood at opposite ends of the kitchen table. My Mom gave me a look like *You should probably go back outside*. But it was too late.

"Kevin," Smokey said, "Do you think I should get rid of this table?"

"Why would you get rid of your kitchen table?"

"I hate it," Smokey said.

"But you needa kitchen table. Where you gonna eat?"

"On the floor."

"I think you should wait," my Mom said. "Maybe sleep on it."

"I'm not sleeping on my kitchen table."

Smokey lit a cigarette. "I'm not supposed to smoke inside, but fuck it. My whole house is fucking upside down."

I looked at the floor. I looked at the table. I looked at my Mom.

"I don't do disorder, Kevin," Smokey yelled. "I'm organized."

She opened the cabinet by the stove. It was full of Tupperware.

"Look at this!" she yelled. "I keep the lids here and da bowls here."

She took a long inhale of her cigarette.

“Everything has a home. I have ADD!...OC!”

“We all have our quirks,” I said.

Smokey is really religious so I thought about adding in something about us being God’s children but everyone in the room would know I was bullshitting. Smokey was still showing me her cabinets. This wasn’t a time for bullshitting.

“I’m not getting enough oxygen to my brain,” she said, tipping her cigarette ash into the sink. “Don’t tell Bob I’m smoking inside.”

She collapsed into a chair. My Mom rubbed her neck.

“Bob,” Smokey yelled at the ceiling.

The garage door opened and Bob poked his head in the kitchen. “What?”

“I needa pop.”

Back in the basement I took photo albums from the shelves and stacked them in the bins. So many photo albums. The basement walls were lined with shelves piled floor to ceiling with photo albums. You’ve never seen so many photo albums, trust me.

Smokey came down stairs, saw me putting all these photo albums in bins, and said: “Now we’re cooking with business.”

A photo album slipped from my hand and fell open on the floor.

“Who even are these people?” I said.

Smokey looked at it and said: “That’s the neighbor kids from 2004-2005.”

And then she started telling me about the other ones, even though I hadn’t ask.

“That one is my niece’s volleyball games. This one’s of the old house. This one’s baby pictures from 1992.”

But then she started taking albums out of the bins.

“Aw. This is Jim and Nancy at one of the block parties,” Smokey said, “They’re divorced.”

“Who?” Bob said.

“Little Jimmy,” Smokey said.

“Little Jimmy? Nah, you mean Big Jimmy.”

“Well, the son’s taller than the dad.”

“Big Jimmy is getting a divorce.”

“Been divorced,” Smokey said, “Now he’s buying the house back from her.”

“Where’s she moving?”

“I think she’s staying.”

“Staying?”

“They share custody of the dogs.”

I stopped listening and slammed the lid on one of the bins and started for the stairs.

I imagined dumping a bag of cut grass into a yard bin. Breathing in that grass clipping air. Getting all full on cut lawn air. That’s all I wanted.

“Here’s one of you,” Smokey said.

I turned around. She had a picture of my little sister sitting on tile floor with a vacuum.

“That’s not me, that’s Liz.”

“Well here’s a picture of your sister then.”

There was my sister. A head of big brown curls. She couldn’t’ve be older than 3.

“I useta run the vacuum when you kids wouldn’t stop crying.”

“That’d make us stop crying?”

“Not really, it just kinda drowned you out.”

I carried more bins up the stairs. Turn right into the kitchen, then walk sideways around the kitchen table I convinced Smokey to keep. Wedge the bin against the wall to open the garage screen door. Then out the garage to the POD. I did this for hours.

Just doing lines back and forth.

At some point I wandered into the utility room to find Bob fighting with the sump pump. He had his arm elbow deep in it. He had a towel around his neck because he was sweating so much. He turned it over and dumped out a bunch of brown water.

“You’re not gonna to believe this,” he said, picking something off the cement floor.

“Believe what?” I said.

He showed me what was in his hand.

A soggy cigarette butt.

That’s all it took. To do all this. To do this all.

Just the ass end of a cigarette.

“Don’t tell Smokey,” Bob said. The fluorescent shop lights gleamed off his shiny forehead.

“It’d break her.”

I tossed the cigarette end back in the sump pump and carry it up the stairs and outside to the trash.

I found Smokey standing under the basketball hoop smoking.

We gave each other a nod. Then she let out a long sigh and said: “yep.”

“Sorry about your mom.”

“Me too. But thank you.”

She smacked her pack of cigarettes into her palm and handed me one. I borrowed her lighter and said: “Don’t tell me my mom.”

We smoked and looked out at the front yard. Down the street a car returned to a driveway. A flag flapped on a pole. The sun was setting and the maples were making big shadows on the grass. Doing lines back and forth. My, look at all that beautiful grass.

“Smokey let me ask you something,” I said finally, “who cuts your grass?”

“Bob or the neighbor boy usually,” she said. She squashed her cigarette out on the cement. “Why, you wana do it?”