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Straight Lines

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ETHAN KEELEY

Straight Lines

The more I think about it, the more I realize that Pearl, Mississippi, the town itself, raised me as much as my mother did. It was no fault of hers; she did her best, and I understand that a nurse's duty is as much to her patients as to her children, even if it meant spending the majority of the day at the hospital instead of at home. Her work ethic set the precedent for mine, though I hardly had one to speak of at the time. So in the summer of my thirteenth year I begrudgingly went door-to-door around the neighborhood to offer up my lawn mowing services. She suggested I charge ten dollars per lawn, though I was vying for at least fifteen—after all, life was expensive, and I was trying to save up for life's necessities, which then included a guitar and some video games. I managed to snag a few customers and that was enough for my mother. There was Mr. Daley a few houses over, the Petersons across the street, and Mrs. Crowley at the end of it. One customer in particular, though, actually made me enthusiastic about my new job, and that was Ms. Crespo one street over, whose daughter Giana had been in my English class the previous year.

I was most definitely in love with Giana, and had been from the time she'd read Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay" aloud in class. I didn't find the poem terribly mind-blowing, but the way she read it—no mistakes, no speed-ups or slow-downs, just steady with a smooth and soft cadence—got to me. She had the darkest hair I had ever seen, and darker eyes. When I came to Ms. Crespo's house on my quest for employment, Giana came to the door. It was only a five-minute walk to her house, but before that summer I had no idea she and I lived so close to one another. I had always assumed people like her lived somewhere else—somewhere specifically not near me.

The Crespo house had light beige siding, a black roof, and a chipped-white front door. An army of grass and moss infiltrated the beat up driveway,

which led to a small garage with a rusty, netless basketball hoop nailed to the top of it.

“Hi, I’m Aaron,” I squeaked when she opened the door.

“Yeah, I know. What’s up?” Her blank stare made me feel twice as self-conscious as I already did.

“Are your parents home by any chance?” I didn’t know yet that *parent* wasn’t to be pluralized for her. Sometimes I forgot other people had split parents, too. She gave me a look I couldn’t interpret—sideways frown and an up-and-down eye motion. I was oblivious to most things, I would later discover.

“I’ll get my mom.”

Ms. Crespo introduced herself and said that in this heat it was more than worth it to pay someone to mow the lawn, and that she was happy to help a young man earn his keep. She was a short, pretty woman, neither thin nor thick. Her teeth, almost always revealed, were very white and her hair, like Giana’s, was straight and black, but other than that she didn’t look much like her daughter. I assumed Giana’s thin face and lean frame must have come from her father.

The first time that I worked for the Crespos, it was the last week of June and the beginning of a dreadful heat wave. It had reached ninety-five degrees by noon and I felt every single degree, not to mention the humidity that engulfed my pores and lungs, making any movement a slog through thick Jell-O. The furnace that was the air, coupled with my curiosity about Giana’s location, inflicted all sorts of anxiety. Was she in her room watching me cut the grass? Were my lines straight? Was she in the living room, reading or watching TV, where I, all sweaty and disheveled, might run into her if I was invited inside? Was she not in the house at all? I considered asking Ms. Crespo when she came out with a glass of fresh-squeezed lemonade but couldn’t figure out how to formulate the question without seeming too direct. I cut the engine and wiped my forehead.

“I really am a sadist, aren’t I?” She widened her eyes and made a fanning motion with her free hand.

I didn’t quite understand what she meant, but found the gesture appealing. “Thank you,” I panted, graciously accepting the refreshment before absorbing all the liquid with one gulp.

She handed me a generous twenty. “A little extra for the heat.”

“You don’t have to do that.” I knew the things you were supposed to say. She ignored my protest and asked if I could come back in a couple days to help with the garden. We settled on Friday, the last day of June.

I had thought she'd be waiting outside like the time before, possibly already starting her work on the garden, but I didn't see her. I knocked on the front door and waited, then heard a faint call in the distance.

"Aaron! Over here!" She was shouting from the side door, which took me a good ten seconds to figure out. Embarrassed, I scurried to the side where half of Ms. Crespo could be seen propping the door open.

"I probably should have let you know I might be inside."

"That's okay."

The side door opened into a narrow vestibule attached to the kitchen. I couldn't figure out the Crespo kitchen; it was such a strange combination of broken-in and state-of-the-art: slick hardwood floor, spotless black marble counters, an oven from what looked like the fifties, and scratched-up cupboards whose handles scuffed the walls when opened too wide.

Ms. Crespo offered me fettuccine alfredo with a side of roasted red potatoes—leftovers, I presumed, but still a much more elaborate lunch than I was accustomed to, and much tastier. It wasn't that my mom was an awful cook—she just worked so much that my lunch options were normally limited to microwaveable carbohydrates and cereal, and by nighttime she was so exhausted from dealing with the handicapped, injured, ill, and dying that she either resorted to take-out or settled for preparing something simple. But as good as the meal was, the thought of Giana entering the kitchen upset my appetite. For a moment I thought Ms. Crespo was telepathic because she suddenly brought up the subject most urgent in my mind.

"You know, I told Giana to come down for lunch five minutes ago but sometimes I wonder if she'll ever leave that room of hers. I'll go call her again." She got up to leave and the house creaked as she made her way upstairs. Suddenly I was sitting at the sleek kitchen counter alone, my plate a creamy war zone of potato chunks and white sauce.

She returned with Giana, who was wearing gray sweatpants and a baggy white T-shirt, her hair falling chaotically over her shoulders. Even this look suited her.

"Hey, Aaron," she said, her back turned to me as she reached into a cupboard for cereal. I loved the way my name sounded in her voice.

"Giana! What are you getting cereal out for? Lunch has been waiting here," Ms. Crespo said.

"I want cereal," Giana replied, nearly overflowing the bowl with generic brown oats, then drowning them in milk.

"Are you finished, Aaron?" Ms. Crespo asked, grabbing my battlefield of a plate.

"Yes. It was delicious."

Giana stood in profile, leaning on the counter and staring out the window while she ate her cereal. The sunlight landed on her hair, revealing the

auburn hidden beneath the black. With all my being I wanted to know what she was looking at and thinking about.

“Aaron’s going to help me with the garden. We’ll be outside,” Ms. Crespo said to Giana, who remained in her picturesque pose, chewing but not blinking.

We started on the garden, which ran alongside the walkway leading to the front steps. I knew nothing of gardening, so I merely did what I was told. Ms. Crespo wore a flattering wide-brimmed sun hat that not everyone could pull off. She lent me some gloves far too big, giving me deflated Mickey Mouse hands. As I self-consciously dug some holes for her new azaleas, I worried that they were the wrong shape or size or depth and that Giana, from inside, would take notice and deem me an unworthy human being.

Between the two of us, it only took a half hour to put the plants in place, pull the weeds, and water the whole row. It looked vibrant, though a bit at odds with the neglected driveway and old basketball hoop in the background. I realized there was no car in the driveway or garage. I wondered what Ms. Crespo did for a living. Maybe she took the bus to work. Maybe she walked.

She handed me two fives and asked if I’d be willing to help her clean the house on Monday. Once again I refused the money, which, for thirty minutes of hole digging, I really hadn’t earned. But she insisted, and I told her I’d be over again at noon.

“Have a great weekend, Aaron,” she said, gliding back inside.

I wanted to say goodbye to Giana but saw no sign of her.

Sunday at ten in the morning was when I took care of Mr. Daley’s lawn. He was an older man who lived alone, had a small, perfectly square front lawn, and always gave me a soda or a piece of candy as a tip.

“Morning, Mr. Daley.”

“Morning, Aaron! My favorite lawn barber!”

This was his favorite line. He had me come every Sunday, so his lawn never really got to be long enough to justify being cut, but I think he appreciated the company. He would, without fail, be sitting on the front steps in his lawn chair reading the paper, glasses perched on his nose, white eyebrows elevated, pale forehead wrinkled.

“Now, get a load of this—they’re postponing the launch of the space shuttle *Discovery* because of some bad weather!”

“That’s interesting.” This was my usual reply when I wasn’t exactly sure which side of the fence he stood on, which was most of the time.

It was just as hot and humid as it had been all week, but I had begun to enjoy the therapeutic effect of mowing lawns, the way the consistent hum blocked out all other noise. I loved as well the up and down motion, the

clear objective: go straight, turn one-hundred-and-eighty degrees, go straight again, repeat. The rhythm cleansed my thoughts, until they too moved in unobstructed straight lines, simple and direct. My consciousness coasted and cut the excess, but now and then I got caught up in thoughts of Giana: Would I see her tomorrow? What did she think of my coming over to her house to help her mom? And why didn't Ms. Crespo have Giana do the tasks for which she enlisted me? If she needed a man, surely she could do better than a scrawny thirteen-year-old boy who still ate overly sugared cereal and watched cartoons most mornings. Giana was taller than me at the time, and I'd be willing to bet, equally as strong, if not stronger. Maybe she was occupied with other tasks. She could have been practicing an instrument, or writing poetry, or any number of endeavors more glamorous than yard and housework. And perhaps Ms. Crespo wanted to encourage me, a young man, to develop a good work ethic as my mother did. Moms were on the same wavelength that way. Single moms, especially.

After I finished Mr. Daley's lawn, which only took about twenty minutes, he handed me a ten and a generic orange soda and called my attention to the paper once more.

"Would you get a load of this? The Jews and Muslims won't stop blowin' each other up!"

"See you next week, Mr. Daley."

I didn't know any Jews or Muslims. All I knew at the time was my town, some of the people in it, and that I was part of Mississippi, which was part of the United States of America. The world was much bigger than I could have imagined, of course, but my world was Pearl, and more specifically my mother, my little jobs, and my school. There was also Madison, where my father lived, but I saw him so infrequently it hardly counted. So the Jews and Muslims may have been blowing each other up, but as long as it remained in a land far removed from me and my town it didn't concern me. Mr. Daley, however, seemed heavily invested in these matters, though I couldn't figure out why. Here was an aged man glued to his front steps, boxed in by his lawn, concerning himself with the world at large, as if one day his house might be the target of an air strike. I had to admire his engagement. The man knew more about the goings-on of the world than just about anyone else in town.

When I got back my mom was in her green bathrobe, a Sunday ritual, making a brunch of scrambled eggs, fruit salad, and wheat toast, her hair wrapped in a purple towel. Sundays were her only full days off, and even then she might be called in from time to time. "Being a nurse is more than a salary—it's a commitment to every human being who's rolled in those doors, good or evil, night or day," she would say.

She welcomed me with uncharacteristic vigor. "There he is, my working man. How's Mr. Daley?"

“Same as ever.”

“Throw that soda in the fridge, Aaron! You’ll ruin your appetite.”

The eggs were overcooked, the cantaloupe and strawberry and kiwi juices congregated to create a discordant flavor, and the toast was slightly burnt.

“So, how was week one?” she asked, sitting down across from me.

I told her that Ms. Crespo wanted me back over tomorrow.

“Again? She sure is putting you to work.” She didn’t sound as delighted as I’d anticipated.

“It’s not bad. I’m never there long.”

“What does Ms. Crespo do?” she asked after a long intermission of chewing. “Her job, I mean.”

I recalled the car-less driveway. I didn’t know. Tomorrow was Monday and she would be home. Maybe she taught and had summers off. Tuesday was the Fourth of July, too, so she might have been on vacation.

“Why?” I asked, somewhat defensively, to my surprise.

She shrugged. “Just curious.”

On Monday we began dusting the shelves in every room. I mostly just removed the items and set them elsewhere while Ms. Crespo dusted, then returned them to their proper arrangement. A wide array of trinkets lined the shelves in her living room—primarily little glass and ceramic figurines of sparrows and finches, some in repose, perched on a thin branch, and others in mid-flight; some transparent and others opaque. I only encountered two picture frames, one displaying a younger Ms. Crespo holding a miniature, beaming Giana above her head, both dressed in bright red sweaters. The other was a collage of Giana’s class pictures from kindergarten to seventh grade; she was posed similarly in each so that one could easily see the gradual elongation of her face and neck, the lengthening of her hair, and the slight diminishment of her smile. There were no pictures of her father anywhere; it was as if the birds had conquered the space where those might have been.

As we finished with the living room I heard light footsteps, then the creaking of the house signaling someone’s descent.

“Well, there she is,” lilted Ms. Crespo. “Gee, and only half past noon. Say hi to Aaron—you remember him from the other day?”

Giana remained standing on the bottom step for a few seconds, wearing a navy blue polo and tan shorts, her hair tied up in a long ponytail.

“Hello,” she said, impassively, her voice golden as ever. “We were in Mrs. Reynolds’ class together last year, Mom.” She sounded irritated.

I was elated that she remembered me so specifically.

“I see. I wish I would have known that. Aaron’s been such a help around the house. You could learn something from him!” Ms. Crespo gradually

raised her voice as Giana walked around the corner to the kitchen. She was obviously trying to avoid conversation with her mother, who followed her. I could sense the tension between them and feared the onset of a dispute.

There was little I hated more than being caught in the crossfire of an argument. It reminded me too much of my parents' final weeks together. No wonder so few countries remained neutral; it was painfully awkward. At the age of seven the word *fuck* and its several uses entered my vocabulary, along with the minor curses. They were ammo in my parents' arsenal, tearing into one another and occasionally deflecting to hit me, the wide-eyed kid who had never before seen the veins in his father's neck and forehead. After a few months of verbal and psychological retaliation, the warring sides settled on a grudging truce, the terms of which forced my dad to move a half hour away and gave my mom primary custody. Father-son time was limited to the first weekend of every month, and I had mostly accepted this arrangement.

While the Crespos skirmished I counted the bird figurines—twenty-seven in total. I wondered where they all came from and when they were purchased. Any one of them might have held a history worth examining or abandoning on a dusty shelf, lifeless and ignored.

Ms. Crespo returned, ignoring the spat that had just taken place. Giana remained in the kitchen. "Well, we're almost done with this, Aaron. Follow me!"

We made our way upstairs, which I hadn't anticipated. We passed the closed door of what I presumed to be Giana's bedroom, adorned with a plain white calendar still stuck in June, and proceeded into Ms. Crespo's room. I felt more uncomfortable than I had moments earlier during their argument. I hated being in my own mother's bedroom—there was something private about it, forbidden—and being in Ms. Crespo's room felt even more like trespassing.

Her bed was unmade and dirty laundry was piled in the far corner—nightgowns and shorts, bras and other items in a tangle. I tried to avert my eyes; I couldn't help thinking I might come across something I shouldn't see. A large mirror hung over her dresser, harboring a small crack in the bottom left corner that branched out across half of the surface, as if it were the victim of a gunshot or some other projectile. An unfamiliar smell lingered in the air, a combination of various perfumes and womanly products that danced in my nostrils; I had just recently begun to notice the scent of women and was as drawn to it as I was repelled by it. It was unknown territory and I stumbled as I entered it.

"Sorry for the mess." She laughed warily. "Don't worry, all that's left is clearing off this dresser."

A few more photographs were on display, none of which included Giana's father, of course, though one in a small square frame showed a young

boy, maybe three or four years old, sitting on a wooden bench, wearing a Greenville Braves baseball cap much too large for his head. He held a melting vanilla ice cream cone with both hands and appeared to be laughing so hard his eyes were closed. In the mirror's reflection I noticed Ms. Crespo looking at me.

"I see you've met Angelo," she nearly whispered, her reflection somewhat contorted by the diverging lines in the broken mirror.

"He's cute," I said. But something felt off, like I was looking into a different time and place, a world that existed only in this photograph. There was no other one like it in the house that I could see.

"He's gone now," she said.

I didn't know what to say. I know now that no one, no matter how young or old, ever knows what to say about the loss of a child. I told myself maybe he was gone in a lighter sense, living elsewhere, with Giana's elusive father, perhaps. But I knew Angelo was dead. Deep down, I knew that much. I involuntarily stepped back and tripped over the bed right behind me.

"I'm sorry." I felt lightheaded and remained seated. The room appeared to vibrate and flash on and off, static encompassing my vision and hearing.

"Are you okay, Aaron?" She touched my shoulder and placed the back of her hand on my forehead. "My God, you're on fire! Here, lay down..."

I awoke on Ms. Crespo's queen-sized bed, everything fuzzy and oversaturated. She came into focus, sitting cross-legged on the other side, watching me. She gave me the concerned-mother look that I associated with the time I was eight and choked on a piece of hard candy. My mother placed her capable hands on my diaphragm and forced the air, and the deadly confection, up and out of me.

"Careful, Aaron. You passed out." Ms. Crespo reached for my head again.

"How long?" I held the back of my skull, as if this would solve things. Then I noticed Giana standing in the doorway, also watching me, her arms folded. I sat up and straightened my back, mortified.

"It's only been a few minutes," Ms. Crespo said. "Here, have some water." She handed me a glass. I took small sips.

"You scared me so much, Aaron." She placed her hand on her heart. "Let me call your mother. Does this happen to you a lot?" She began walking towards the phone on her dresser.

"No, it's just this heat. I'm fine. Really," I lied, taking another sip.

"I should call her."

"No. She's too busy. Don't worry." I got to my feet and my eyes caught Giana's for a moment. We both looked away, but I saw her face redden.

Ms. Crespo fed me again and walked me home. We didn't say a word to each other until we reached my house.

"Just take it easy, okay? If you need anything, give me a call. When does your mom come home?"

"In a few hours. When do you need me to come by again?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll let you know. Here." She reached into her pocket and held out another twenty. "Have a good Fourth of July. Have some fun."

My mom worked most holidays, so I walked to Town Hall alone on the Fourth. Most of my friends had gone out of town with their families to celebrate, and the rest were too cool for organized events such as these. But I enjoyed the atmosphere—the smell of fried anything, the little kids bouncing around, the world still so large to them and full of wonder. I saw the Petersons in the distance, Mr. Peterson holding his little girl on his shoulders to give her the best view of the local jazz band.

As I walked between the corndog and funnel cake stands I felt a poke on my shoulder. It was Giana. She was alone too, this time wearing a breezy yellow sundress. My heart nearly stopped.

"Hey," she said, laughing nervously and avoiding eye contact. "I didn't know you'd be here."

"Nothing better to do, I guess." I laughed back. I was just as surprised, not so much by her presence, but her approaching me.

"Feeling better?" she asked, finally looking at me.

"Yeah, I'm alright. I don't really know what happened." Then I asked, "Where's your mom?" Her face tightened. I immediately regretted that.

"She's with some guy, I don't know." She sounded frustrated.

"Oh."

"Are you staying for the fireworks?" she asked.

"I planned on it, yeah."

"Come with me. I know the perfect spot."

I followed her past the screaming and laughing children, past the tipsy adults, and up a steep hill away from everyone and everything. When we reached the top, I could see the whole town was nothing more than a simple grid—straight lines like the ones I carved in the grass. The sun had just buried itself behind us. The fireworks wouldn't start for another half hour.

"Guess we got here kind of early," she remarked, sitting down cross-legged.

"That's okay. I like the view." I squatted next to her.

An oddly comfortable silence overcame us.

"Whatever my mom did to you, I'm sorry," she said, picking the grass.

“What do you mean?” I surveyed her profile, trying not to stare at its fortunate dimensions.

“She’s crazy.”

“I think we all feel that way about our mothers.”

“No, I mean she’s actually crazy. She gets paid for it.”

I had no idea what she meant, so I kind of grunted and joined in the grass decapitation.

“She hasn’t worked in years,” she continued. “When my brother died she blamed my dad for it. They fought all the time. It was just words at first but then they started hitting each other. I don’t know why I’m telling you this.” She bowed her head.

“It’s okay.” I wasn’t sure if she wanted to say more, so I held up my end. “My parents fought too. They got divorced six years ago. Now my mom works so much I barely see her.”

“What does she do?” she asked.

“She’s a nurse.”

“You’re lucky. Your mom fixes people.”

I had no reply. I’d never felt lucky about my family before.

“They arrested my dad for hitting my mom too much. I was seven, too,” she said.

The world was full of coincidences.

“The whole time my mom had stopped going to work because she could barely do anything. I had to help her get dressed in the morning and I had to learn how to cook.” Her soothing voice seemed ready to break. “The only money we had was from government checks. After a few months my mom started doing things herself again, but it wasn’t easy for her. The checks kept coming and she got used to it. They have to cut her off soon, though, because she’s able to work again. She hasn’t for years, and I don’t know what we’re going to do.”

I felt a riptide form in my chest, sucking out whatever delusions I had held just a week earlier. I had never heard of a government check before, or of people so broken that they couldn’t dress themselves in the morning.

I asked her what happened to Angelo. He got sick. It started with the flu and quickly escalated to pneumonia. They did everything they could but nothing fixed him. He was young, fragile, and born with a weak immune system. She spoke clearly as she told me this, as if she was reading Frost, as if she had trained herself to recall this catastrophe without stammering or hesitation.

I understood then that Giana, this girl I had put on a towering pedestal, was far more broken than I was. She was so much more than the idealized figure I made her out to be in my head. She had strength and compassion and flaws, and I admired her more at that moment than I had before.

“I’m sorry.” I hated saying that with all my being. It was so trite, so far removed from the depths of my sympathy. But the English language provided no more sufficient option.

I learned later from Mr. Daley that they finally launched *Discovery* that Independence Day. “It’s just amazing what we humans can do, isn’t it?” he said.

I continued to help Ms. Crespo the rest of that summer, mostly mowing her lawn and doing various other tasks she felt she needed me to do. I never told my mom about Angelo or my passing out in Ms. Crespo’s bedroom—she dealt with others’ pain enough in her own life, and I would have been selfish to add to it. Any money Ms. Crespo gave me I stored in an old cookie tin under my bed. There it remained, untouched, until I went off to Mississippi State. By that time, Giana had moved to New York to study fashion merchandising and Ms. Crespo had sold the house. I never found out where she went, though I imagined she took her birds and pictures with her.

As I gathered my things for the semester I came across the dusty tin and the money inside. I drove into Jackson and picked up some things for my mother: a bouquet of flowers, a new toaster, and the best chocolates in the city. I left them on the kitchen table where she would find them after her shift, and then I got in my car and left for school. We had said our goodbyes the night before and I wouldn’t be far away.

I wish I could say Giana and I became lifelong friends, or more even, but after that summer we would merely smile at each other as we passed in the halls of Pearl Junior High. Too much had been said, too many truths revealed, so we said nothing.

I’ll never forget that Fourth of July when we sat on the hill, overlooking the town that built and beat us. Darkness had taken over and the world had finally cooled for a bit. The fireworks were about to begin. But I had seen fireworks before, and I knew they were just explosions disguised as beautiful things.