

Graham Cotten

What Makes America America

My father said taking naproxen was nothing like the commercials. In the commercials, adults with osteoarthritis went punting on quiet, shady creeks, or ice-skating when it was winter. They were professional ice-skaters. They taught children to ice-skate. They were happier than anyone without arthritis, except perhaps their spouses, who were also very happy. Joint pain, they seemed to say, was bygone as puberty.

"If I had a frozen creek like that, I wouldn't be stupid enough to dance all over it with razor blades on my feet," he said as we watched TV.

To my father, that's what ice-skating was: a death dance. You never knew where the ice was thin. We were a cautious family. When we went to the ocean once, we all wore floaties; even my mom, who was on the swim team in high school. My father pointed out that she was not on an *oceanic* swim team. The water was completely different.

"If I had a frozen creek like that I would smash it with a sledge hammer," I said.

"We don't have a sledge hammer," he said.

My mother and my little sister Annie were at school taking down all my mother's posters and decorations. It was Saturday morning, June 2nd, the day after the last day of school. My father was drinking Jack Daniel's to celebrate with me. I'd graduated elementary school with all A's. I had a ninth grade reading level.

"Plus, that's how people throw their backs out," he said.

He worked for the power company as a lineman. Every month, he told us, he witnessed people injure themselves. They lost eyes, ears, teeth, cartilage in their hips, a leg, fingers; they slipped disks in their spine; their skin melted. Still, it was much safer now than it was when his uncle was a lineman. His uncle saw people die all the time.

We were waiting for the Cubs game to come on. All around the city thousands of people were doing exactly the same thing. My father often commented on this phenomenon. He liked to think of us as part of a cohesive unit, poles strung up together, relaying messages to one another, humming with purpose. If someone wasn't part of the unit, he said they were "off the grid."

Our neighbor Roy Johnson was off the grid. We couldn't stand the look of him, his spindly, lurching frame. Roy Johnson was the only person on our street with a riding lawn mower. It had a turning radius of zero, he told us. It had a cup holder. On Saturdays we woke to its twin cylinder, four-stroke engine whirring outside and watched through the window as he outlined his yard, spiraling inward. He was taboo in our house and we couldn't stop talking about him. If we were down, we speculated what Roy Johnson might be doing. He was always taking a bubble bath, or learning Spanish on his computer, or arranging his multivitamins alphabetically, and so on. Soon we were happy. Whenever his commercial came on local channels, my father would note that Roy Johnson had misspelled *attorney* in the fine print at the end.

"What are we having for lunch?" I said.

"Ask your mother," he said.

"She's at school."

"Call her up."

She said we were on our own. I wanted to make spiral Easy Mac. It was best to keep it simple, we agreed. The fewer moving parts, the fewer points of failure. My father's favorite machine was the wedge, which had no point of failure. If, he claimed, in the beginning he had created the earth, it would've been made out of wedges.

But in its simplistic beauty, we'd fostered a single point of failure (SPOF) in our family's metabolism. We kept only microwavable dinners on hand. And the microwave broke.

"Off we go," my father said.

We loaded up the station wagon and went for chilidogs. The seats burned under our thighs. My father took an ice cube out of his glass and rubbed it over the vinyl. We watched the phase change: melting, pooling, evaporating, a lifespan of water.

"Let me try," I said.

"It makes the seat crack if you do it too much," my father said.

We drove fast, seeing as we had a mere half-hour until the first pitch. The hotdog stand was eleven minutes away door-to-door. We would have made it.

My father's stomach foiled us. Unable to hold out any longer, it ripped open like a piñata. He began to spit up dark material.

"What's wrong?" I said.

He held his hand under his chin to catch it and kept driving until we reached an exit. We pulled into a strange gas station.

"Should I call mom?" I said. "Where are we?"

But his mouth was full of black grinds. He released his seat backwards, bent over double, and vomited onto the floorboard.

"Help!" I said.

I waited with the gas station attendant for the ambulance. My father was lying on his side in the backseat of the car, moaning, his insides dribbling out.

"Did he eat something?" the attendant said.

"No. We were going to get chilidogs."

"We have hotdogs inside," he said. As if perhaps all was not lost.

"My mom should be here any minute."

We heard its sirens first, calling in the distance. We saw its red lights begin to bounce through the traffic, caught flashes of its big yellow hull between cars as they moored on the side of the street. Finally, the ambulance arrived, deafening, shining, full of EMTs. They surveyed the situation. They checked my father's air passageway, his breathing, his heart rate, his forehead. They administered medication to stabilize him. By the time my mother arrived, they were five minutes gone, taking my father with them on a stretcher.

"Did they say anything?" she said in the car.

I told her everything.

"Was dad drinking?" she said.

"He was celebrating," I said. "Where's Annie?"

"I left her at the school."

"On purpose?"

"Of course."

We flew down the street with our emergency blinkers engaged and our horn honking, following the intermittent sounds of the ambulance, running through red lights like teenage delinquents.