

Last Paletta
by
Mark Felps

It was the melting paletta that caught my attention. I was walking home from work at the art supply store, and it was fucking hot. The kind of heat that makes your shoes and the pavement want to turn into one thing. I had my headphones on and my mask up. Breathing through the mask in the heat was like sucking wet farts through underwear. My backpack was heavy on my sweaty back.

I had my earbuds in, and Blockhead was convoluting beats, and I was trying to forget what Kahlil at work had said about maybe needing to lay some more people off if shit didn't get normal soon. Like there's a normal to get anymore.

And that's when I nearly walked past him. He was just a guy sitting on a step, eating a paletta in the heat, front door slightly ajar. Bulky, strong, black with a tight natural haircut. He was sitting on the stoop wearing shorts and a Mavs jersey. And the paletta was dripping down his hand.

That's what caught me. His paletta was melting all down his hand, and when I glanced down -- still across the street -- I could see a puddle had formed. White and milky, spreading across the hot pavement. And when I looked up to catch his face, I stopped moving.

You hear that shit in movies all the time about the "thousand yard stare" but that's not it at all. He wasn't looking outward at all, he was looking in. Somehow he'd turned his eyes around and it was clear he wasn't seeing anything. I pulled my headphones off.

"You okay, my man?" I shouted across the street. It was nearly seven and the sun was still up and burning the world, but the streets downtown had cleared, but either he hadn't heard me or didn't respond, so I waited until a Coors truck rumbled past, and jogged across the road.

Closer up I could tell he'd been crying. There were tracks where the tears had cut through the dirt on his face. And up close I could tell it'd been awhile since he'd showered. His shorts were dirty, his jersey smeared with various bits of food, and he hadn't been taking care of himself.

I squatted down, trying to catch his eyes, and said, "Hey, man, you okay?"

Nothing. Not only no response, but his eyes didn't even flicker. Whatever he was seeing, it was deep inside, and I might as well have been a ghost to him.

I was afraid to touch him, I'll admit that. I'm a skinny white kid who grew up in the suburbs and bailed on that the moment I could get away from my drunk dad and vacant mother. I was scared a lot in the city, and he was twice my size. Overweight, but obviously muscular, too. So I stood there, squatting, hand hovering, afraid to quite touch it to his shoulder.

I was still trying to psych myself up when I realized I might have more luck going inside and seeing if there was someone who knew him.

"Stay here, dude," I said to him even though he clearly couldn't hear me, "Let me go find someone to help you."

I stepped past him, and up the cracked steps, and pushed the weathered blue door open. It opened to a short hallway, floor lined with linoleum from what looked like the fifties, mustard paint on the walls that was peeling in spots. And no lights.

There was still plenty of sun. In Texas in summer there's always plenty of sun. But we were just south of downtown, and the buildings were blocking most of it from getting in, so the hallway looked dark just past the door.

I leaned in and said, "Hey, anyone there? Hello? Anyone?"

Nothing.

I took a couple steps inside, found a light switch and flicked it. Nothing. I listened and couldn't hear the air conditioner. It was nearly a hundred outside. My stomach started to roll as I kept walking. There was a smell and for once I was glad of my mask.

If you've smelt it before, there's no need to describe it, and if you haven't, no description will suffice. I had never smelled it before that day, but I knew almost instantly what it was, even though I told myself it was just spoiled food.

The hallway opened into a living room/kitchen, with a bar dividing the two. The living room was a mess of food wrappers and bottles and pizza boxes. And again I tried to convince myself that what I was smelling was food.

There was a TV and an old couch, and it was obvious where he'd sat on the couch, watching the TV, because the wrappers and food and bottles surrounded an empty space there. And next to the couch was a reclining chair, wrapped in plastic, a small table next to it, a crocheted blanket in pink and green. On the table, a heavily used Bible, a notepad, and some pens. Above the TV, a picture of Jesus I'd seen a hundred times in a hundred different houses. Smiling beatifically at the dark and filthy room where the man outside had been sitting, eating, and watching.

When I couldn't put it off any longer, I stepped into the kitchen, and there she was. His grandmother maybe? Foster mother? Older parent? I couldn't tell. All I could tell was that she was an old woman in a pink shirt, showercap still on, collapsed on the floor. And she was dead, of course. And had been. My stomach rolled again and I felt a tightness in my throat.

She was on the floor in front of the stove, and on the stove was a pan full of charcoal. The refrigerator was open and nearly empty, just condiments and an empty box of palettas. I leaned against the counter and tried not to think for a minute. Taped to the side of the refrigerator, along with pictures drawn in a child's hand -- or maybe not -- was a page written in spidery cursive, that said "Ordering Pizza" and then went on to list the number and how to order what he wanted. He liked sausage and onion, thin crust, light sauce.

And I looked across the bar and counted pizza boxes, and then I couldn't help it, but I started crying too. He'd been here weeks with her, until the food ran out, and then he'd ordered pizzas until the power went off. No wonder he'd gone inside himself. There was nothing left for him here.

It took me awhile, but I got hold of myself, and I went outside and sat on the stoop next to him. The paletta was gone now, a pool of drying sugar on the stoop. This time I didn't hesitate, and I put my arm around him, and said, "I'm so, so sorry. Let's get you some help."

I called the cops because I didn't know who else to call. I made sure they knew what was going on, and that he needed some sort of social worker, along with medical people to deal with the body. I didn't want the cops giving him shit, so I stayed after they got there, until social services got there, and a woman talked to him while I told the cops everything three and four times. And then she led him off into a van and they told me they'd take care of him.

And I never saw him again, anywhere except inside my head, where I see them both still, and I hope he found something inside to sustain him without her.