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Floodlights by Richie Smith



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Metaphor shines brightly in Richie Smith’s flash nonfiction, “Floodlights.” The lights in the title appear in different forms throughout Smith’s piece: first as stage dressing for a high school basement air band, then on a cruise ship, and then in an operating room where Smith’s mother undergoes a mastectomy that greatly impacts the entire family. But the lights in “Floodlights” serve a greater narrative purpose, illuminating events he cannot forget, marking moments in time that relate to his mother’s life and her illness.

Floodlights can be blinding and disorienting, and Smith does a masterful job of conveying his bewilderment as a boy. A scene where his friend ransacks Smith’s parents’ bedroom for Freddie Mercury-style clothing becomes a reminder of just how quickly

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remember the car was a BUICK, silver with a gray interior. I remember how well it handled the bumps.”

Smith says so much in “Floodlights” with very little. A piece that initially seems like it might be about the memories of a teenage air band shifts naturally into a meditation on life, illness, death, and the moments scattered in between. Years unfold in single sentences. “I tucked her padded bra back into the drawer,” he writes of his mother, “never once thinking her cancer would spread.” Not only is “Floodlights” an illumination of the past, but it is an illumination of what it means to endure, in life’s brighter spaces and in its darkest moments. —*CRAFT*

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The floodlights we found under my father’s workbench.

I didn’t want to cut chemistry for the fourth time in two weeks, but Lee was the boss. Lee was Freddie Mercury, and I was only Brian May playing a tennis racquet in the summer shirt I found in my basement in the oil burner room in the metallic closet with “out of season” labeled in my mother’s handwriting. The shirt was thin cotton, something a guitar player would wear, white with navy birds on the sleeves and a leather tie that laced up the neck like a feminine sailor shirt. I remember my mother wore it on her cruise to Bermuda with my father, the first trip away after her operation, in her padded bra without a left breast.

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America for a bon voyage photo featuring our neighbor Bee Goldberg's Jewish afro, my fifteen years of bewilderment in a Kiss T-shirt, my sister's silly string hair and my father's pale skin, my mother in the center with a scowl. I imagine she felt as if everyone could see through that white and navy blouse, knowing she was a scarred woman on a maiden voyage, trying her best to be a wife again.

"It's not a good day," I said to Lee, my acid-base balance fuzzy from the start. Nelson was sick (Roger Taylor), and Gordon (John Deacon) didn't want to miss English class.

Lee was pissed. "We're on tour. There's a concert schedule to keep."

"What about Gordon? Why is he allowed to miss a show?"

"No one cares about the bass."

Soon we were bonging in my basement, blasting Thin Lizzy, the warm-up band, from my stereo. My father's floodlights already overheating my tiny bedroom as we prepared to become Queen.

Lee rummaged through the house for a new risqué outfit, first swinging open my sister's closet, his mouth agape exhaling fumes of Thai stick and disappointment.

"That's all the clothes she has? My sister's closet is so fucking stuffed with blouses and pants you can't even

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THEN INTO MY PARENTS' BEDROOM, WHICH ALWAYS SMELLED fresh because the carpet was new, because they redid their bedroom after my mother came home from the hospital, though their dressers were old, the same ones they had in the first apartment right after they got married in Brooklyn, years before we were born, almost two decades before my mother found the lump.

It didn't seem right to see Lee stomping on the plush blue carpet in heavy Timberlands. Before I knew it, he was rifling through my parents' clothing drawers.

"I can't believe your mother wears padded bras."

And I remembered the humid July day after the biopsy: the "frozen section," performed under floodlights in the operating room at Hempstead General, Lee staring me down the next morning in the carpool ride to Morris Country Day where we worked as CIT's.

"Was it benign or malignant?" he asked, so matter-of-factly, whipping back his oily curls, chomping on bubble gum. But Nelson and Gordon were quiet and so was Gordon's mother behind the wheel, everyone waiting for my answer while I clutched the brown paper lunch bag my mother still managed to pack that morning, with ham and cheese on a roll, potato salad, a napkin and a small brownie tucked in.

"What was it? Benign or malignant?"

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By now, “Brighton Rock” was blasting from my bar mitzvah stereo, cheaper than Lee’s Pioneer receiver and Bose speakers and Technics turntable. Brian May’s guitar licks were loud and distorted. The concert started without us.

“You know my mother had an operation,” I said, and Lee looked up, batting long eyelashes above the slits of his wasted eyes.

“That’s right,” he said, nodding like a guy pretending to be Freddie Mercury, like a guy who might feel sad and never let you know.

I tugged my mother’s bra from his reeking hand.

“Just get the fuck out of here,” I said.

The front door slammed. I waited for my heart to stop racing then began to smooth Lee’s Timberland tracks from the carpet. I refolded my mother’s clothing, all the sweaters and blouses we’d someday donate to The Salvation Army. I tucked her padded bra back into the drawer, never once thinking her cancer would spread.

Inside my bedroom, “Now I’m Here” was playing.

I turned the music off and unplugged my father’s floodlights.

The tour was over.

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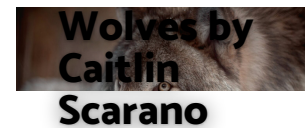
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Featured image by Cesar Badilla Miranda, courtesy of Unsplash.

BY RICHIE SMITH | FLASH CNF, CNF | JANUARY 7, 2026

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