

# Our Puzzle Glue



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Throughout my earliest years, my dad worked twelve-hour shifts at a paper mill and my mother was out of the house as often as he was. My uncle lived with us and his job was to take care of me. We'd play hide-and-seek and board games, watch movies on his blow-up mattress, and gradually piece together intricate puzzles, which he'd then glue and hang up on his wall. He fed me three meals a day and made sure I took naps when I got crabby. He was a good caregiver.

One Thursday evening when I was five-and-a-half, Uncle Robin told me to call my friend Azalea and her brother Gage to ask if they wanted to meet us in Central Park. They did, and because I didn't get to see them much, he let me stay and play with them for several hours. I kept asking for five or ten more minutes, as the sun set and it grew darker and darker. When Gage finally told his sister they had really better get home, my uncle checked the time and shouted:

“Shoot! We gotta go!”

I called goodbye to my friends over my shoulder as he looped his arm in mine and hurried us away. We ran for a few minutes and my feet kept almost getting tangled as I tried to keep up. (He was the fastest runner on his cross-country team from sixth grade until he graduated.) Finally, I tripped and fell roughly to the concrete.

“Cassi!” Uncle Robin cried without missing a beat. “You okay?”

“I’m okay.” I answered and jumped right back up to prove my point, despite being sore.

“Good.” He said and stepped up to the curb. Within a couple minutes, he’d hailed us a cab and we’d settled into our seats. The ride was quiet and I noticed that he was tense, staring continuously at his watch. I watched him with concern. He eventually met my eyes, took a shaky breath, and whispered:

“It’s late, Cassi.” My bed time was eight thirty and I knew it was a lot later than that. Regardless, I wasn’t tired yet anyway and told him it would be okay.

“But it’s a school night,” He said, “and your parents are already going to be home.” He looked and sounded nervous, but I didn’t really know why. I hadn’t fully realized at that point in my life how deeply my mother disliked my uncle. So I didn’t understand how big of a deal it could be for us to be late. I just gave him a hug while he sat chilled as a block of ice for the rest of that ten-minute cab ride.

When the driver parked in front of our apartment building, my uncle grabbed my hand and we both ran all the way up to the fourth floor, though I still struggled not to trip over my own feet as I tried to keep up with him. He fumbled with his key, dropping it on the ground in his anxiety before picking it up, shoving it into the keyhole, and turning the door knob of our apartment. I looked in and saw both of my parents sitting on the couch, watching TV. I sensed something coming then and began to feel anxious myself. My dad rarely stayed up past nine-thirty and my parents rarely sat together.

Uncle Robin stepped into the apartment very slowly and I came in behind him. Feeling tension in the room, I purposely faced the door while I reached my arm into the hallway to pull the key out of the lock. I still faced the door while I eased my coat off.

“Robin, where have you been?” My dad's voice was heavy with exhaustion, the way it always was after work and when he ate breakfast with the rest of us in the morning, but it was also raised. I never expected to hear my dad raise his voice at my uncle. They were far apart in age and he had adored him since he was a baby. Sometimes he seemed to forget that his brother wasn't a child anymore. I knew without looking at him that my uncle was slouching and looking at the floor. Slouching made him lose a whole inch of height so that he only stood at five feet tall. I knew that even if my dad had been standing right in front of him at his full height of 6' 3", he wouldn't have been intimidated, but I was sure he had entered new territory nonetheless.

“I took Cassi to the park.” Uncle Robin spoke clearly but softly, softer than I'd ever heard him speak before. “We would have left sooner, but I wanted her to get time to play with her friends.”

“What kind of parents let their kids play until *ten-thirty* at night when they have school the next morning?” The volume and bitterness of my mother's tone startled me. Not that I hadn't heard her sound the way before (actually, she did more often than not), but I wasn't prepared then. I imagined her face puckered up like a lemon, just before I turned around and actually viewed it, as well as Uncle Robin appearing the way I previously described and my dad wearing the same tired expression he always did.

“Gage and Azalea’s parents don’t care where they’re at.” I said. “Their daddy walked out on them and their mommy’s spent too much time hitting the bottle since he left.” I practically used Gage’s precise wording, aside from the curse words he’d used. He may have only been eight, but he cussed like a sailor.

Regardless of my paraphrasing, my dad stared at me as if I’d swore. Or maybe he was just staring. I couldn’t tell if he was still present in the conversation. He zoned out often when he was home. Most of the time, it seemed to me at least, he really should’ve just stayed in bed.

There was a moment of silence after I made my statement. Then my mother went on, narrowing her eyes at Uncle Robin and not acknowledging that I’d spoken:

“Much longer and we would have called the police to have them find the two of you. Anything could’ve happened this late at night. Not to mention, now Cassi’s going to go to school tired tomorrow. I swear, you’re the most irresponsible person I’ve ever met.”

As my mother shook her head from side to side disapprovingly, a terrible idea unexpectedly crept into my mind: She probably cared a whole lot less about me being out past my bedtime than she did about having a reason to put my uncle down. I felt hot inside suddenly, as if I were a boiling kettle that no one could be bothered to take off the stove. That was the first time in my life that I ever felt truly angry.

“Mommy,” I somehow managed to keep my voice sugar-sweet, “Uncle Robin’s very-”

“Go to bed now, Cassi.” My mother’s words cut me off sharply. I was too stunned to continue being angry, so that feeling was short-lived. I shouldn’t have been so stunned. She was rarely in a good mood and snapped at me often.

“*Now.*” She said again. Her narrowed eyes were turned onto me and I was nervous. Not knowing what else to do, I glanced briefly at my dad and my uncle, but I left the room before either would have had a chance to offer me a different escape. I was so close to stepping over the threshold of my bedroom when I heard my mother say:

“You know, I’ve never liked the idea of you watching my little girl.” I stopped in my tracks and froze in the same instant that my dad cried my mother’s name (Stephanie). He sounded more upset and bewildered than tired. She must not have said anything like that in front of him before either.

“Well, I haven’t, Kyle.” I felt squirmy inside as I imagined the look my mother might be giving my dad. “He doesn’t act his age. Any money he’s ever had has come out of our pockets. At twenty-nine-” (Uncle Robin was only twenty-six) “-years old, he’s never held onto a job for more than a year, never lived off his own salary, and never been on a single date. He’d wind up homeless and alone if we were to cut him off. I don’t want Cassi to grow up with that kind of example and wind up like him.” The house was completely silent for a moment. Then I could hear footsteps as my uncle turned and quickly exited the living room.

“Robin!” His name came out as a loud gasp from my dad’s throat. He appeared in the hallway and brushed past me to twist his door handle open. I grabbed his wrist and he didn’t look at me when he yanked it out of my grasp and strolled into his room, closing the door very quietly behind him. I ached to open it back up but also felt like I shouldn’t.

Within fifteen seconds, a fight erupted in the living room. My dad started it, which was astonishing to me because he was always on the receiving end during my parents’ arguments. Even at that age, I was fairly aware that my mother held far more power in our household than anyone else did.

I had little idea what to do. While my parents screamed at each other, I sat down in front of Uncle Robin’s door and started crying. I hadn’t cried since the second-to-last day of preschool, when I’d thought I would never see Azalea and Gage again because I wouldn’t be in school with either of them anymore. (My uncle had me get their landline number on the last day and helped me schedule a playdate at the park, the way he had done in the present.) But I didn’t want to go to bed and didn’t know what else to do.

I must have cried for ten minutes, then I got to my feet, opened Uncle Robin’s door a crack, and peeked my head into his room. He was pushing stuff out from under his bed with a little broom. Papers and numbers and *Chapski* trinkets littered the hardwood floor. The dark red rolling suitcase that had been in his closet for as long as I could remember was open behind him with some of his things stuffed inside. The beautiful dragon puzzle we’d been working on at his crafting table since February had disappeared,

presumably back into its box that was sitting at the bottom of a tiny tote, next to his many jewelry making kits.

“Uncle Robin!” My voice was so high-pitched that I almost squeaked.

“Come in and shut the door.” He didn’t turn to face me and his tone was so unfamiliar that I was scared. I did what he asked, then I stood there shaking. I kept half a room of distance between us, as much as it hurt me to do so.

“Uncle Robin, what are you doing?” I shrieked.

“Packing.” He mumbled, lowering himself to his knees to look at the stuff that had been under his bed, using that tone again. “I’m moving out.”

“*What?*” My heart pounded so loudly that I could hardly hear myself speak or breathe. “No! You can’t leave!” I forgot my caution as I rushed across the room and got down on my own knees to wrap my arms around Uncle Robin’s middle. He struggled to get away until he broke free from my grasp and stood up, causing me to fall into his stuff all over the floor. He glowered down at me as he said:

“Cassi, I’ve always known your mother didn’t like me and didn’t want me around. But I’m fudging tired of her treating me like I’m worthless. And maybe I’ve lived here since I graduated from high school, but she’s wrong about me. I don’t need your parents to support me and I’m going to prove it.” I couldn’t take any more of his fiery gaze in my emotional state and bowed my head before starting to cry again. My tears were usually quiet, but those ones were accompanied soon by sobs, which I pulled my shirt over my head to try and muffle.



My heart and mind throbbed with every moment and every breath. My own deep feelings distracted me from my outside environment enough that I couldn't hear my parents' voices anymore, much less their words, and I was only partially aware that Uncle Robin was still standing over me.

“Cassi,” He whispered after a long time, alerting me that he was kneeling just in front of me. I brought my face out of my shirt and hugged him tightly.

“Cassi, Charlie's coming to get me in a few hours.” (Charlie had been his best friend since middle school cross-country.) “I'm going to stay with him until I can find my own place.” His voice was firm. I looked at him. Even with my vision blurred by the tears leaking out, I could see the determination in his expression.

I stared at him for a long time. In my mind, I replayed the words he'd spoken earlier about why he wanted to move out and slowly comprehended them, as much as I didn't want to. I looked down at the spot on the floor where his rug should have been, my tears drying up but my heartache remaining.

“Do you really have to leave?” My voice was little more than a peep. I'd figured out that he was going to leave no matter what I said or did, but I didn't think I could accept it.

“Yes, Cassi, I do.” But his tone was kind. Slowly, he returned my hug. The embrace lasted longer than I had expected after he had seemed so rushed. I didn't mind at all though. I didn't want to let go.

Eventually, Uncle Robin went back to packing while I sat hugging my knees to my chest and watching him. My heart tore to see all his belongings, the little pieces of him, disappear into his suitcase or a tote. But I had the idea in my mind that those moments might be the last I ever saw him, and I felt the need to soak them all up.

“I can’t take much,” He said at one point, “so I’m gonna give some stuff to you.” I didn’t get the chance to reply before he started listing off items in his room that I could have: his blue “Brooklyn” hoodie, his pajama pants with little moons on them, his Mickey Mouse comforter and pillowcase (with the lumpy pillow inside of it), his dark red rug, and each of the puzzles hanging up on his wall. He set all those things down on his bed to stay there after he left and I started crying again.

“But- but you love all this stuff!” I wailed. Uncle Robin came over and hugged me.

“Cassi, it’s okay.” He said. But I couldn’t be comforted.

“I think Charlie should be out there.” He said after a while. He pulled away from me, went to his tiny window, and peeked through the blinds. He added, “Yeah, he is.”

Uncle Robin strolled across his room, cracked open his door, and looked out.

“Okay, Kyle and Stephanie went to bed.” I felt yet another stab to my heart when he said that. My dad always said goodnight to my uncle and I and kissed my forehead before he went to sleep with my mother. Even if that was our only

in the night, always, I always with my hands from him. *Not tonight, I guess*

Uncle Robin gave me one more hug, just one, before taking his suitcase and tote out into the living room, into the hallway outside our apartment, and out to Charlie's car. Within ten minutes, he was gone. The stuff on his bed, his bed, his TV, his table, and his dresser were the only visible indicators that he'd ever lived there.

An invisible force took a lighter to my cracked heart and it burned. I threw on Uncle Robin's hoodie over my shirt and changed into his pants, moved his puzzles onto his table with the greatest care, and laid down on his bed to bawl. I shoved my face in his pillow and pulled his comforter over my head, hoping I wouldn't wake my parents. I didn't want my dad to try and comfort me (or worse, cry with me) because I knew nothing he could do would be able to help my pain. I *definitely* didn't want to hear what my mother would have to say.

I must have fallen asleep at some point. I remember pulling the comforter off my face because it felt suffocatingly warm, seeing sunlight coming in through the window, and spotting an object on the floor next to the bed. I reached out and picked it up. I saw that it was the bottle of Uncle Robin's puzzle glue that had been under his bed. *He must not have seen it*, I thought. I had to fight hard not to start crying again as I held it.

I got up and turned Uncle Robin's TV on. I found a channel that was playing a movie I liked and watched it from the halfway point. When there were about twenty minutes left, I heard knocking on the bedroom door.

“Robin, can I talk to you?” *Woah*, I never would have thought my dad could possibly sound any more groggy than he typically did. He sounded like the zombies from a horror movie I started watching once while my uncle was in the shower.

“Robin?” His voice was more urgent that time. I had no intention of opening my mouth to speak, but I stared blankly at the door. My dad turned the knob and stepped into the room. He looked over at the bed and our eyes locked. His brows furrowed.

“Cassi?” He asked in confusion. I watched as he swept his gaze over the room and his eyes grew wider and wider until they couldn’t grow any wider and his jaw dropped. That’s the moment when I looked away from him, back at my uncle’s TV. Something had shifted inside of me.

“Uncle Robin left.” I was very frank. As much as it killed me, I wouldn’t allow my tone to reveal any emotion. I sounded practically nonchalant.

“He *left*?” My dad gasped. “Where did he go?” I shook my head.

“He’s not coming back.” I’d had all night to painfully process that fact.

“Where did he *go*?” I shook my head again.

“I don’t know.” I lied. I was trying to shut down the idea he was probably developing in his head. He would get his hopes up for nothing. I knew he wouldn’t

be able to convince Uncle Robin to come back. I think he knew that too after some long, silent moments where the idea had time to sink in.

“I’m not going to school today.” I felt it was the best time to say that. More silence followed, during which he should have had time for that to sink in too.

“Fine.” My dad’s tone was soft and defeated... and I think he was crying. He quickly left the room, pulling my door shut behind him.

I finished watching my movie and found another one. Shortly after its beginning, I suddenly heard fighting erupt the way it had the night before, all the way in the kitchen that time. I could imagine the fight had something to do with my uncle leaving, but I picked up the TV remote and cranked the volume up twenty notches so I couldn’t hear what my parents were saying.

I’d had to set down that bottle of puzzle glue in order to pick up the remote. I’d still been holding it in my hand. As I found myself staring down at it, I got to thinking. At first, I simply thought about how the contents of such a little bottle could hold together so many pieces of a puzzle, pieces of such different shapes and designs. Then, my thoughts grew deeper. The idea occurred to me that my mother, my dad, Gage, Azalea, and I were all puzzle pieces, so different that we wouldn’t seem to be able to fit with any others. But puzzle glue kept the rest of them attached to me. That glue was my uncle.

I couldn’t have known that day how significant those thoughts were. Later on, I realized. Events in my childhood supported those ideas I had. With Uncle Robin gone, my parents couldn’t afford another babysitter and so had to move their

work shifts around so one of them could be home to watch me after school and on the weekends. For a whole year, my mother would go out with friends instead of watching me. My parents were already fighting just about every night by the time my dad found out that I was spending quite a bit of time home alone, but that was the last straw for him. He filed for divorce and I had to split my time between my parents, but my mother was still never home. My relationship with her deteriorated over the years as I came to realize that she truly wasn't a great person. I haven't seen her since I turned eighteen. I gradually developed respect for my dad because of how hard he worked to support me. I visit him every so often, but we're not all that close.

It's worth saying, also, that I didn't see Gage and Azalea for years after that night. I'd forgotten their phone number. (Uncle Robin kept the piece of paper where Gage wrote it down, but I believe my mother must have thrown it away when she went through his room for things to sell.) Azalea and I started becoming friends again when we attended the same middle school, but she had to move in with her aunt and uncle halfway through sixth grade and we rarely talked after that.

I reunited with Uncle Robin a few months after he moved out (he got a job as a janitor at my elementary school, and he and Charlie rented an apartment that had a bedroom for me a couple blocks from where I lived), and today I have a better relationship with him than I do with either of my parents. I've known for a long time that I can't give him full credit for keeping my family's puzzle pieces together or keeping my friends' puzzle pieces attached to mine when I was little. He told me that himself when I suggested the idea. However, we did all start to detach

from each other soon after he left, so I still consider him to have been our puzzle glue.