

MORIARTY, RICHARD, M.F.A. River Runners. (2019)  
Directed by Michael Parker. 91 pp.

This collection of stories attempts to explore obsessions with sport and how those obsessions change the lives of the characters involved.

RIVER RUNNERS

by

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A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
2019

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03/15/2019  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

02/22/2019  
Date of Final Oral Examination

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For believing in my work and offering me a chance to develop my craft in this program, thank you to Terry, Jim, Michael, and Craig. Thank you Holly, Michael, and Craig for your generosity in showing me how to develop my approach to that craft. Thank you to my classmates for treating my work with just as much attention to detail as you do your own. Thank you to Stuart and Emilia for the writerly wisdom I gleaned from you over the past couple years. Above all thank you to my family for your constant love and support.

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## **River Runners**

“See if you can hear it,” Jim said to his brother as they took the exit for Chesterfield driving out of St. Louis, which would get them onto I-70, the highway that stretches across the width of the state of Missouri and several others, all within the confines of their “jurisdiction,” as their boss called it, the area within which they were responsible for ensuring that every potential customer in the “transaction,” that of the highest quality strains of cannabis concentrate for fifty bucks per eight ounces, was discovered and delivered to.

“Hear what?” L.C. replied, before he spat into the Styrofoam cup in his right hand, his other hand on the wheel, the cup originally filled with French roast now gradually filling with tobacco juice. “I’m listening, dammit.”

“You aren’t really listening. If you were, you’d hear it,” Jim said. He started telling L.C. about the organ part in “Like a Rolling Stone.” “See, how the organ part is just an eighth behind? See? There! Did you hear it? That’s what makes the song. After they played it Bobby went in there and listened to it and told ‘em to turn that organ up. That’s his genius, man. Giving the people what they need before they even know what that is.”

“Alright, I heard it,” L.C. said, wondering when his brother would stop obsessing over trivial shit such as this and get his mind into real things, start becoming somebody. They pulled over for gas. Jim went inside the QuikTrip to get drinks and snacks for the

two of them while L.C. filled up the gas tank: taquitos, hotdogs, and, when they were feeling like making a healthy choice, chicken Caesar wraps.

From the gas pump L.C. called out to his brother as he emerged from the store, a plastic bag full of what L.C. hoped were chicken Caesar wraps—he wanted to start cutting back on the grease after letting himself go for a while there. “You got the pouches? Skoal Wintergreen?” He turned right around and went back in for the tobacco. L.C. shook his head. When they were younger L.C. to get impatient with his younger brother, scold him for even the slightest mistake, like buying green apples instead of red ones at the store—their mother wouldn’t eat the green ones, couldn’t stand the tartness of them—and make him fix it immediately.

Jim came back from the convenience store in a minute with the tobacco, along with the food and drinks. They got back on the road and almost as soon as they’d finished their hotdogs and Pepsis—before leaving L.C. almost told him to go back in and get him a chicken wrap but he couldn’t deny the fact that a dog sounded pretty good to him—Jim fell asleep, his face wedged in the space between the headrest and the passenger door window, his head occasionally bumping against it when they hit a depression in the pavement.

“Arrive alive,” Jim said, seemingly out of nowhere—L.C. didn’t realize he’d woken up, and didn’t realize he was reading a roadside sign from the state troopers to buckle up until they were much closer to it than when Jim could read it. “You buckled up, L.C.?”

“Of course I’m buckled up, Jim,” L.C. said. “The hell kind of a question is that? Easy way to get pulled over if we aren’t.” L.C. double-checked that both of them were buckled up.

“Alright, alright,” Jim replied. “Fair enough. I’m just saying, though. You never know what can happen out here. Gotta be careful.”

“You don’t think I’m being careful out here?” L.C. nodded toward the speedometer—it read just under seventy, which was the speed limit. “Come on, Jim. Just lay back and let big brother do his job.”

“Oh, so you’re saying I don’t do a job out here?” Jim asked. “I don’t fill any purpose on this mission?”

“Not what I’m saying, Jim, not at all,” L.C. replied. “There you go again, extrapolating. All I said was, we’re driving right now, and I’m the driver—always have been, ever since sophomore year of high school, if you can remember—so let me drive and don’t tell me how to do it. It’ll be your time to shine soon enough.”

Jim huffed. “Alright, alright,” he said. He went back to sleep, and his head went back to bouncing ever-so-slightly up against the window, and L.C. thought, good thing that head of his wasn’t protecting much of a brain.

They drove for another hour before L.C. broke into the Saran-wrapped paper plate full of chocolate-chip cookies that sat on the dashboard, placing the yellow Post-It that was on it—the note said, “Good luck out there! Love, Mom”—in his pocket, trying not to crumple it up. Before they left, she insisted they take them. “You’ll let your energy run low, you won’t be any good out there on the court,” she said, and they almost made the



mistake of correcting her, that they might play a pick-up game or two along the road, but that the primary objective of the trip was not to earn money refereeing high school basketball games but to sell weed to high school kids. Jim avoided sweets, controlled by a fear of weight gain caused by his past life as a chubby pre-teen. One time way back in middle school a boy in Jim's class called him "fatso" right to his face before gym class as Jim was sitting down in the locker room, and unfortunately for the boy—Henry Pitt, who owed a lot of his popularity to the fact that he shared a surname with the actor Brad—L.C.'s class was coming back into the locker room from the field at this moment and L.C., upon hearing the comment, yanked a clump of Henry's long-ish blond hair from the crown of his head down toward the ground, almost hard enough to pull the hair directly from his scalp, and Henry whirled around ready to fight until he saw who it was. Henry shuffled past him and hurried out toward the field.

"Who should we dedicate this mission to?" L.C. asked, hoping Jim would open his eyes and say something—it looked to L.C. like his brother was only pretending to be asleep, and he hoped to lure Jim out of the charade.

"Does it really need a dedication?" Jim responded, one eye still shut. "I'm not sure it does."

"It's tradition, Jim," L.C. said. "We always dedicate the missions."

"I know we always do it," Jim said. "I'm just not sure why. We're not writing books here. Anyway, they're plenty of alwayses out there that don't make sense, to me at least. Dogs are always going to bark at mailmen. People are always going to listen to Grateful Dead. You're always going to be obsessed with basketball."

“Wait, hold on a second,” L.C. said. “We’ll save the Grateful Dead part for later. What is there that doesn’t make sense about me and basketball?”

“Come on, L.C. How long are you gonna hang onto this dream of yours?” Jim asked. “I mean, how long are you gonna coach little kids?”

“What the hell, Jim? How is it a dream? I really am a basketball coach, there’s nothing fantastical about that. And they’re not little kids, they’re teenagers.”

“Pre-teenagers,” Jim said.

“Whatever you wanna call it, but they’re not little kids. They’re players, and they’re my players,” L.C. said. “And how are you gonna come at me with this accusation that I’m living in a dream world? When’s your band tour gonna start paying the bills for us?”

“Who ever said my music was about paying the bills? You know,” Jim said, “that’s what your problem is. Everything to you is a way to pay the bills. No dollars no sense, that’s how you think. Just means to an end, that’s all anything is up there in your head. That’s a sad way to think, man. Real sad.”

“Well, that’s fine, that’s fine if you want to play your music and all, I’m all for you respecting your creative impulse and whatnot,” L.C. said, not without a hint of sarcasm. “But bills don’t pay themselves, Jim, I do. The family discount on life for you is about to expire.”

“You’re threatening me?” Jim asked.

“How’s that a threat?” L.C. asked in response. “Just statement of fact. You think we can keep living on my hourly wages as a sub teacher? You need to get a job, Jim. If you need to go back to school, then do it. Then you get yourself a job.”

“Maybe I will.”

“No, you most certainly will. No maybe about it. Especially,” L.C. said, “now, since this is going to be our last one of these missions.”

“Huh?” Jim asked. “Last one? We’re just getting started, I thought. How are we gonna beat this pay?”

“That’s what I’ve decided, Jim. I’m done, which means you’re done. It’s time for me to move on. We’re not that young anymore, Jim. I mean, we’re not old, that’s for sure, but we’re not young, either. How am I ever supposed to start a family if I’m disappearing every few weeks on an undisclosed order of business? No woman’s gonna put up with that even if I am bringing money back.”

“What’s all this family talk, now,” Jim said. “You’re putting the horse before the cart. Last I checked you needed a partner before you started a family, and last I checked, you’re not exactly hot on the trail for one. Not a lot of prospects streaming through the apartment last I checked.”

“Oh, so you’re going Dr. Phil on me now, huh?” L.C. shot back. “Expecting me to take relationship advice from a guy who is, need I quote you here, a ‘hater of love from now till the day I perish from this godforsaken planet.’ Huh, well now I think of it, that was actually pretty eloquent for you, Jim, despite the immaturity behind the sentiment.”

“I’m just saying, man,” Jim said, rolling down the window to toss out an apple core that had been sitting in the side pocket on the passenger door since the day before. “That’s just never been your priority. Finding a partner, I mean. Hell, neither has it been mine, but we’re different, you know that. You’ve just never made time in your life for that. It’s a surprise to me now, you saying that’s what you want. So, well, if settling down is what you want, probably is best to move on from this.” He waved his hand at the dashboard and the road ahead of them as if the wave of his hand could encompass all they’d gotten themselves into.

“I don’t know that’s what I want, Jim,” L.C. admitted. He felt his voice coming from somewhere deeper, down in his gut, not from his head, where his voice originated from when he got angry. “I just... Sometimes I don’t know how we ended up here. Like, I thought life was just getting started for us. Maybe it is, but it feels like somehow it sped up on me and I’m already in the middle of it somewhere. So, maybe I’m just responding to that. If we’re already somewhere in the middle of life then we ought to start building it into something. Putting down roots. That’s why this has to be the last trip for me.”

“That’s fair,” Jim said. “But let me ask you something. What makes you want to get tied down to an old ball and chain anyway? I mean, generally speaking. Or, if you want, more specifically speaking. Seems like you might be going through your quarter-life crisis now, maybe you want to talk about that, I don’t know. Maybe I’m just confused about why anyone would want to get tied down to an old ball and chain at all.”

“Of course you are, Jim,” L.C. said. “You who hasn’t stayed with the same woman more than two weeks in your whole life. No surprise there.”

“Who said we’re talking about me?” Jim said. “Hey, brother, I’m twenty-five, I’ve got plenty of years of hooliganery in me yet. Or at least two, by your logic.”

“Just feels right, Jim,” L.C. said. “Feels like it’s time.”

“Oh, bullshit,” Jim said. “You’ve got your eye on someone, I know it.”

L.C. blushed.

“Ha! I knew it,” Jim said. “Big brother has himself a crush. How’d I know it? What else would make you wanna throw a good thing like this away, Coach? Huh? I knew it. Who’s the apple, huh? Who’s the apple of thine eye, Master Larry?”

“Larry ain’t me, Jim,” L.C. said. “Larry is Dad, and I ain’t Dad.”

“Alright, Coach, but that’s besides the point. Get to it now.”

“You wouldn’t know her,” L.C. said. “Oldern you.”

“How would you know I don’t know her?” Jim asked. “Gimme the name.”

“What’s a name mean to you anyway?” L.C. asked back. “What’s the difference what the name is?”

“Means a hell of a lot of a difference if I can put a face to it,” Jim said. “C’mon now. Cough it up.”

“Alright, alright,” L.C. said. “It’s Stella. Stella Hundley.” Stella recently joined the faculty at L.C.’s school, English teacher and assistant girls’ soccer coach. The two met at an athletic department meeting a few months before. He convinced her to meet him for coffee on one occasion and a beer on another. He convinced himself—up to this point—that Stella was genuinely interested in him, that the two might have a future

together, that their common interests in sports and developing young people into contributing members of society.

“Ha! Alright, Coach,” Jim said. “I see you. I know Stella. Nice girl.” Jim propped his socked feet up on the dashboard.

“What do you mean, you know her? How?” L.C. asked. “Never went to school with us.”

“Just ‘cause she didn’t go to school with us doesn’t mean I wouldn’t know her,” Jim said. “St. Louis isn’t small, isn’t big either though. She went to Visitation. Played soccer at some school down in Arkansas.”

“Alright, now wait a minute,” L.C. said. “Just tell me how you know her.”

“How do you think her?” Jim asked. “Damn, L.C., you want me to sugar-coat it for you? If it makes you feel any better I’m not the only one.”

“Jesus,” L.C. said, “I’m gonna be sick.”

“Listen, man, I’m sorry,” Jim said. “You just gotta understand that she’s not looking for what you bring to the table just now. Now, that’s not to say that, five, six, maybe seven years down the road, she won’t have changed. If you’re into her though, you might have some waiting to do.”

“What is it, you’d say, that I ‘bring to the table,’ then, Jim?” L.C. asked.

“Come on L.C., you know yourself,” Jim said. “You’ve got a big heart. You’re a nurturer. You’re what some people might commonly refer to as a ‘girlfriend guy.’ You want a relationship, nothing wrong with that, nothing at all. You just ought to know, and honestly I’m glad you’re hearing it from me, that she ain’t the one for you.”

L.C. gripped the steering wheel like he was trying to strangle it. He heard Jim say, “Hey man, slow the hell down!” Then he realized he was pushing the pedal down to the floor. He eased off of it but by then it was too late. A state trooper popped up in the rearview mirror and was closing in on them.

“The hell got into you?” Jim practically shrieked. “What now, man? What the hell happens now?”

“Easy, Jim, goddamn!” L.C. shouted. “Listen, whatever we do we can’t be freaking out about it, that’s the easiest way to draw attention. Just be cool, alright! Now gimme the registration.”

“The hell are we gonna do if they find the stash, man?” Jim shouted back.

“What’d I say, Jim? What’d I just say? You keep that tone and you bet your ass we’re doomed. Give me the registration and just don’t say anything. Trust my lead, alright?”

“Your lead just got us pulled over, goddammit! You think I’m gonna trust it now?”

“You got a better option?” L.C. asked him. “We’re here now aren’t we? This is what is happening, Jim. Alright? Now hand me that registration.”

Jim flipped open the glovebox and took out the registration papers and tossed them onto L.C.’s lap. L.C. glared at him.

“Just don’t say anything, alright?” L.C. said. “Remember that.”

L.C. rolled down the window and had his license and the registration ready to hand the officer when she walked up to the driver’s side of their car.

“Good evening, Officer,” L.C. said as he handed her the documents.

“Evening,” she returned. “You fellas in a hurry or something?”

“No, ma’am,” Jim blurted, and L.C. shot a glare at him, his eyes saying, I told you not to talk!

“Then you’ll have to explain to me why it is you were going ninety in a seventy,” she calmly stated.

L.C. turned away from Jim, toward the officer. “We’re very sorry, ma’am. My brother and I here were just having a small disagreement, I lost track of my speed as I got caught up in it. I apologize and promise that it won’t happen again.”

“What’s the matter with your friend over there? Your brother I mean,” the officer said to L.C., nodding toward Jim, whose face had turned red as a balloon. L.C. saw his brother was gripping the console with his left hand and the door handle with his right, squeezing them like thick braided ropes. Told him to play it cool, L.C. thought. Goddamn it, my little brother is gonna blow this whole thing up. “Sir?” she directed toward Jim. “Does he speak?” she asked L.C.

“Yes I speak goddammit!” Jim blurted, words rushing out of him like air shooting out of a tire.

“Sir! You watch your tone with me, sir!”

“But why is he speaking when I explicitly told him not to!” L.C. said while glaring at his brother.

“Alright, gentlemen, which one of you is going to tell me exactly what the hell is going on here?” the officer asked.



“Nothing is the matter, ma’am,” L.C. said, scrambling to defuse the situation. “Like I said my brother and I were just in the middle of a verbal altercation, nothing major, nothing we can’t work past, and that’s why you caught me speeding back there, and why you see the two of us here, my brother and I, are a bit tense at the moment.”

“Why is it you told your brother over there not to speak then?” the officer asked. “Seems like the proper way to work past your disagreement would be communication, Mister...” and she glanced down at his license before finishing, “Landrenox? Is that how you say it?”

“Landreneaux, ma’am,” Jim said, and L.C. was still unnerved by the sound of his brother’s voice, the last sound he wanted to hear in this moment. “Land-wren-oh,” he said again, slower this time.

“Where you boys from?” she asked.

“St. Louis, ma’am,” L.C. said. “Just outside of it.”

“And where you headed?”

“Business trip, ma’am,” L.C. said.

“Huh,” she said. “What sort of business you in?”

“I’m in athletics, and so’s my brother here. We’re basketball referees, we’re working a youth tournament over in Kansas City the next few days.”

“Funny way to refer to it, a ‘business trip.’ Blowing whistles at a bunch of kids. They must be paying you pretty good, you being in such a hurry to get there.”

“They aren’t,” Jim said.

“Huh,” the officer said, looking puzzled. “And they don’t have youth tournaments back there in St. Louis you can work? Doesn’t seem like the most efficient way of doing ‘business,’ as you call it, driving across the state to do something you could do back home.”

“It’s a state-wide tournament, ma’am,” L.C. said. “Championship for the summer league. Only youth tournament being played in the state at this point in the year.”

“Well, look at you,” the officer said, pretending to be impressed. “Reffing the championship. You must be proud.” She handed him the ticket for speeding.

“Thank you, Officer,” L.C. said. “We promise this won’t happen again.”

They heard the whoosh of a car going by, some kind of sports car, a yellow blur bouncing back and forth between lanes to pass each car in front of them.

“Duty calls, gentlemen,” the officer said, her last words to them before sprinting back to her car and taking off after the yellow car, the screech of her sirens rushing through the rolled-down window of their car for only a second and then there was silence, and the state trooper was only a blue dot on the road ahead of them.

Two hours later, L.C. and Jim shot baskets at an outdoor court near their hotel, recounting their recent stream of luck.

“You sure you wanna call it quits on our side gig now?” Jim asked as he heaved up another three-pointer and knocking it off the backboard then through the hoop, a shot that always peeved L.C.—the bank shot from three-point territory was always a product of luck rather than skill.

“Absolutely,” L.C. said, always a man of his word. “That was too close of a call, Jim. I lost control of myself and nearly compromised the mission. I apologize for that. Both of us could’ve ended up in the clink just because I lost my temper. I don’t think I could trust myself again, even if we were to run another mission.” He lifted up a three-pointer of his own and swished it.

“Fair enough,” Jim said as he passed the ball back to L.C. “I don’t think I could trust myself either, after nearly blowing the whole thing up for us.”

L.C. swished another three-pointer.

“I’m just messing with you,” Jim said, passing it back to L.C. again. “But let me ask you this. What makes you think a woman like Stella wouldn’t find your side gig attractive. If you ask me, I’d say she’d pay a little more attention to you if she knew what kind of business you were in, outside of education. Woman like that wants a little danger in her life. Just sayin’.”

“Enough about Stella, Jim,” L.C. said, and meant it—it only took a couple hours after hearing what Jim told him about her for his infatuation with her to fizzle out almost completely. A couple hours, plus a few games of one-on-one, Jim winning one after several bank shot three-pointers, L.C. winning a couple on a handful of his signature shots, what he called “river runners”—the running shot that he would float up one-handed over a defender when the defender expected him to drive the lane and go straight to the rim instead, calling it a “river” runner because, back in high school, he’d fire them over defenders all along the Missouri, from St. Louis to Kansas City and a whole lot of places in between.

“Still got it, I see,” Jim said to L.C. after they finished, sitting together on a bench beside the court, sharing a bottle of water that Jim had filled up at the hotel.

“Oh yeah,” L.C. replied. “That one’s not going away. Like riding a bike. Whatever happens in life, at least I’ll still have that shot.”

They drove back to the hotel to complete the business that brought them there—Jefferson City, state capital—and the next morning went on to Kansas City for their last drop, for the trip and for their careers as drug runners. Later that afternoon, on the four-hour drive back to St. Louis, L.C. and Jim smacked their hands on the steering wheel and dashboard, respectively, in time with the rhythm of “Everybody’s Got to Change Sometime,” and sang along with Taj Mahal about changing their ways before ending up in the lonesome ground.

## **Out of the Bunkers**

On a Saturday, the first day of August, Mason arrived at work an hour early, 4:30 a.m. instead of 5:30. The weekend before, he had taken a bet with his boss, Ron, head manager of the maintenance team at Millworth Golf Club, to see who would win in a round of eighteen holes. Mason lost to Ron, so the match ended up costing him the wager, half a week of work hours, which he made up by working twelve hours each of the past four days. The extra hour on Saturday morning would finally get him back to even.

With the key Ron lent him, he unlocked the garage that kept all the mowers and leaf blowers and rakes. He took down a push broom and swept dust off the concrete floor. He flipped on the floodlight on the outside of the garage, since the sun wouldn't be visible for at least another hour, and rolled a small mower outside so he could cut the swath of grass that separated the garage and the maintenance worker parking lot from the golf course itself. He filled the golf carts with gas. He went into the meeting room and turned on the coffee maker. A couple minutes shy of 5:30 the other maintenance workers started filing in.

Their team meeting began, with Ron drawing up the maintenance plan for the day on the whiteboard. Ron put Mason and the rest of the new workers on "Bunker Duty." Bunker Duty meant spending the morning raking each and every sand trap on the course from top to bottom, so that when a golfer hit an errant shot into a sand trap, the ball

landed softly and came to rest quickly in the sand, instead of skipping across a hardened, un-raked surface and off into the tall grass or into the woods somewhere.

“You gotta beat him, Mason,” said Brent, another new worker at the course, as the two of them rode together in a cart out toward the first hole to begin raking the first of its seven sand traps. “Someone needs to bring Ron down a peg or five. You’re the only one of us who can do it.”

“I’ll keep trying,” said Mason as he parked the cart near the green and the two of them hopped out, each of them taking one of the sand traps that surrounded the green. Mason counted each stroke of his rake through the sand, as he often did to occupy his mind with something—this particular bunker usually took between forty and fifty, though there were others on the course that took over a hundred. It only took a few strokes to wake up his back pain, which stemmed from an injury that put his career of playing competitive golf to an end before it ever really began. Each time the pain reminded him of the previous summer, before he was set to go off to college. He went out mountain biking with a group of friends and suffered a spinal compression fracture in a wipeout, in an instant erasing the scholarship to play golf he’d worked over a decade to achieve.

“Still got a few summer Mondays left,” said Brent when he and Mason hopped back in their cart and moved on to the next hole. “You still got a few more chances to take him down before we get the boot.” Mason and Brent and the rest of the seasonal employees needed to start looking for other jobs, since the course hired only a few of them to stay on in the winter and take care of general maintenance tasks around the course. Winning a weekend off in his next match meant he’d have a few days to go out

looking for winter work. He spent the rest of the morning scratching away at sand traps and visualizing all of the precise angles of shots he would need to hit if he was going to beat Ron in their rematch, which was set for the following Monday.

Mason woke up rejuvenated and anxious to compete that day, despite waking up well before sunrise the six mornings before it. Ron got set up to take the first shot and hit his drive and it almost split the fairway in equal halves, then rolled another twenty or thirty yards before stopping right in front of the green.

Mason set up his own shot and swept his driver through the ball with eighty percent effort, the violent turn of his hips causing a ripple of pain to shoot through the lower part of his spine, making him double over. He watched as the ball landed on the left side of the fairway about twenty yards behind Ron's.

“Damn, buddy, you okay?” asked Ron.

“I'm alright, I'm alright,” said Mason, standing upright again. He picked up his bag and started walking ahead.

“You sure you don't need a cart?” asked Ron.

“I'm alright,” said Mason. “Just need to walk it off. I'm alright,” he repeated, as if the simple repetition of the phrase could make it come true.

They walked together up the fairway, each step exacerbating the pain, each step reminding Mason of his greatest failure. All because of one wipeout he was wandering through a handful of community college courses and part-time jobs instead of playing golf at the University of Missouri, the school he'd dreamed of attending since childhood.

Mason took his approach shot, and even the half-swing brought with it a wrenching pain, though he still managed to land the ball about ten feet from the pin.

“Nice shot, kid,” said Ron, who then lofted his own shot up onto the green. They watched as it rolled toward the pin and stopped within three or four feet of it.

They walked up to the green and finished the hole, Ron needing only one putt, Mason needing two after barely missing his first. At the next tee box, Ron hit another drive with surgical precision, then whistled in approval.

“You know,” said Ron, “you can throw in the towel any time and I won’t think any less of you. The ‘Beat the Boss’ challenge is still open a few more weeks.”

Mason stepped up to hit his drive, which cut almost as straight a path as Ron’s did, though it landed about twenty yards short of his.

They walked down the fairway together and Mason set up his approach shot first, thinking that throwing in the towel at this point was no longer an option. If he ended up owing another weekend’s worth of hours, at least he got a full round of golf out of it. He breathed in deeply and swung with about sixty-five percent effort, and knew right away even that was too much, that he hit the ball too hard, that it would zip right over the green and into the sand trap behind it. But when he looked up from his shot, he saw the ball clank off the pin and drop straight down to within a couple feet of the hole. He won the hole with that short putt. And as they worked through the course his luck stayed with him—on the seventh hole, he hit an approach shot out of the rough that bounced off a tree and landed five feet from the pin; on the thirteenth hole, he hit a drive that missed landing



in a creek by only a few feet and instead ended up ten yards in front of the green. When they reached the eighteenth hole, they were tied.

Mason teed up his shot first and hit a drive that landed right in front of the green but took a bounce to the right and ended up in a sand trap.

“Uh oh. Looks like somebody finally fell out of favor with the golf gods,” said Ron as he stepped up to take his shot. Ron’s ball landed just left of where Mason’s did, and then it skipped up onto the green.

“Finally! Order is restored in my kingdom,” said Ron as he walked out ahead of Mason.

He walked after Ron toward the green and then stepped down into the sand trap as he’d done hundreds—maybe thousands—of times throughout that summer, except now he was armed with a pitching wedge instead of a rake. He lined up his shot and took in a deep breath. He chopped down with the club directly behind the ball and a cloud of sand flew up in front of him, the wind blowing grains of it back into his face. They clung to the sweat on his forehead and cheeks. The cloud settled and he saw the ball land at the top of the green and then inch down toward the hole, finally coming to rest within a foot of the pin.

Mason pumped his fist. Ron, dejected, set up his approach shot, and hit it at an angle so it would land at the top of the green, as Mason’s did, and then roll down to the hole, but he hit the ball too hard, and it skipped over his target and bounced a couple of times before rolling off and down the backside of the green.

Mason tapped his putt in for a birdie, sealing his victory.

“Helluva shot, Mason, helluva shot,” said Ron as they walked back toward the parking lot together. “Listen, Mason,” he said as he lifted his bag into the trunk of his BMW. “We’re gonna need an extra body around here to get things done over the winter. We’d like to bring you on staff year-round. Are you interested?”

“You kidding me? Of course I am,” said Mason, caught off-guard at first, then suddenly feeling as if his luck would always be good from that point onward.

“Glad to hear it. We need a little more stability around here,” said Ron as he slammed the trunk shut and shook Mason’s hand. “We’ll bump up your pay, of course. And we’ll get you out of the bunkers, get you promoted to mowing grass.”

“Thank you, Ron, thank you. I won’t let you down, I swear,” said Mason, considering telling Ron how badly he needed this job, how he was barely able to make payments on the room he was renting from an old teammate after his parents kicked him out, though he decided not to bring any of that up.

“I know you won’t,” said Ron. “You’re dependable. And it’s not like we’re painting the Sistine Chapel out here. Just trimming hedges and branches. Well, a bet’s a bet. I’ll see you in a few days.” He gave Mason a salute before he rolled up his window and left the parking lot.

Mason waved to him, then went to throw his bag in the trunk of his car. The back pain still made every slight movement a chore—even reaching down into the backseat for a bottle of aspirin set it off, though he was more numb to it than he was at the start of the match. He drove along, his golf clubs clinking together as his tires moved over the bumpy pavement on the highway.

He clicked on the radio and a familiar blues song floated through the car. *Got my mojo working, but it just won't work on you*, Gatemouth Brown sang to him, and Mason thought about Sydney and how she was drifting away from him, had been for months now. He called her up to tell her the news about his job.

“Hello?” she answered, which peeved Mason because she answered as if she didn’t know who was calling, even though she obviously knew, since his name was right there on the screen in front of her.

“It’s me,” he said. “Got some good news to tell you.”

“Oh yeah?” she asked. “What’s that?”

“Why do you sound annoyed?” he asked back. “Aren’t you excited to hear it?”

“Sorry,” she said, then sighed. “I’m just not in a good mood right now. Can you come over here and tell me?”

“Sure,” he said, a bit surprised by the invitation, since her tone made it sound like she didn’t want anything to do with him at the moment. “I can be there in ten.” He asked her if she was hungry, if he could pick up anything for her at the store on the way, but she declined. He made a u-turn at the next light—he’d been driving north toward his house but hers was in the opposite direction.

When he got to her door, he knocked twice and the door flung open before he could knock a third time.

“I missed you!” she said as she embraced him, bunching the fabric of the back of his golf shirt in her fingers, pulling the front of the shirt tight.

“Hasn’t seemed that way lately,” he said. “Honestly, I was surprised you answered my call.”

“I’ve been busy,” she said, turning her back toward him but grabbing his hand and leading him inside. They went into the kitchen and Mason opened up the fridge. He grabbed the jug of milk to pour himself a glass.

“Well, make yourself right at home, why don’t ya?” Sydney said. “I’m kidding. Have whatever what you want. I’m gonna go change clothes and then I wanna hear about your big news, okay?”

Mason nodded as he chugged the milk, which left a trail of the liquid in his mustache after he’d finished it and set it down. He looked back toward the front door, where Sydney and her roommate kept their keys hanging on hooks fixed to the wall beside it, and noticed her roommate was out. He washed out the milk glass and placed it in the dishwasher.

“Come in here,” Sydney called for him from her bedroom, the door left just a crack open.

He went in and saw her lying under the covers, her back turned to him, only the back of her head visible. “Get in here, Mason,” she said.

He took off his shoes and hat, wondering if getting him into bed was the only reason she invited him over. “You think I’m that easy?” he asked. “I thought we were going to talk first.”

“What made you think that?” she asked him.

“Cause I told you I had news,” he said. “I got promoted at work. Full-time. Year-round.”

“At the golf course?” she asked.

“Of course at the golf course,” he said. “That’s where I work. Where else would I get promoted?”

“So you’re still raking bunkers,” she said. “Just doing it more often now.”

“No, actually. I’m mowing greens now. And, Sydney, that’s not even the point. The point is, I’ve got a steady job now. So, if you meant what you said, we could start thinking about moving in together.” Her challenge to him from six weeks earlier still rang in his head daily, pushed him through the last hour of a long morning at the course on at least a dozen occasions: she said if he found a permanent job they could look for an apartment together.

“Will you just get in this bed, Mason?” she said, turning now to face him, lifting up the blanket to invite him, revealing her body to him, which was completely bare. “We can talk later.”

He took off his golf shirt and the khaki shorts it was tucked into and climbed in. She nestled her face into his neck and kissed it. She mentioned something about the salty taste of his skin, as she always did when they made love after he got off the course. She finished undressing him and got on top of him. She moved against his body more forcefully than he was used to. Mostly she kept her eyes closed, or she stared directly ahead at the tapestry that hung above her bed, making it seem to Mason that she was

trying to avoid eye contact with him entirely, her movements suggesting that she was using his body to achieve a purpose.

They came together and she rolled off of him. They laid there together in silence for a while, the whirring of the ceiling fan the only sound in the room.

Her phone rang from the bedside table and she answered it quickly, then carried on a conversation with a series of one-word answers from which Mason was able to guess that it was one of her parents.

“I have to go, Mason,” she said.

“Of course you do,” he said. “Of course you do now.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that we didn’t talk about anything. You’re avoiding it.”

“So what if I am? Maybe I’m not ready to move in with you, Mason! Did you think about that? Did that factor into your plan somewhere?”

“That’s what you wanted!” Mason said. “That’s what you said you wanted.”

She stood up and got dressed.

“You’re actually leaving now?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “That means you are, too.”

In the parking lot, she said goodbye to him with a firm kiss, which only confused him more.

“What I need is some time to think, Mason,” she said from the driver’s seat of her car. “Please. Just give me that.”

Like her words from earlier that summer, these words rang through Mason's head for the rest of the day, and then the rest of the week, and several weeks after that, all the way up until the week before Thanksgiving, after he'd left her dozens of voicemails and texts, a handful of letters, and one note on the door of her apartment. He got back in his car Sunday afternoon after spending all morning trimming branches of trees along the sixteenth and seventeenth holes and saw her message on his phone.

I hope I haven't hurt you, it said, but I needed to move on from you. He read the text two or three times. He got back out of the car and retrieved his clubs from the trunk, not knowing what to make of the text besides the fact that it didn't matter to him what she hoped for at this point. Freezing rain peppered his jacket, as it had done all morning. He walked out onto the first tee, took out his driver and teed up a ball. He gripped the club a bit tighter than usual so he wouldn't lose his handle on it in the rain, and swung through with a level of power that was aided considerably by his frustration. He watched the flight of the ball, thinking about the measurability of its arc and distance, how unlike life it was in its predictability and adherence to the path it was set on.

The ball landed about ten yards in front of the green, kicked right a few yards but not far enough to land in one of the bunkers. Mason picked up his clubs and walked after it.

## Game Day

“You get those problems done, Mitch?” Bobby asks Mitch when he sits down next to him in the back row of first period pre-Calc on Wednesday morning.

“Don’t worry about it, Butler,” Mitch replies. “Those assignments are a waste of our time. Hardly worth any part of our grade anyhow. And besides, I can do these problems in my head. I don’t need to prove that to old Griffin until test day, and that’s not for another week.”

“You didn’t hear?” Bobby asks.

“Hear what?” Mitch asks.

Mr. Griffin strides into the classroom. He walks like he is a foot taller than five foot eight, his actual height.

“Bobby, what the hell didn’t I hear?” Mitch asks again.

“Test is today, Mitch.”

“Cut it out.”

“I’m not kidding you. Hope you’re ready for it.”

“Bullshit,” Mitch whispers.

“You didn’t get the email?” Bobby asks.

“No I didn’t get the damn email,” Mitch says. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Ah, forgot you missed class on Monday,” Bobby says. “That’s when Griffin told us. Guess there was no email.”



“And you didn’t think to mention this to me at practice on Monday? Or Tuesday?” Mitch asks him.

“Sorry, dude,” Bobby says. “Guess I forgot.”

Griffin calls roll and starts passing out the exams. Mitch looks down at his exam and his mind goes blank.

Thursday morning, Mitch and his sister, Val, drive to school together. The engine whirs softly, Val nibbles at a crunchy piece of toast. The radio is off.

He looks over at his sister and feels a sort of unknowing, wondering what Val thought about their parents’ recent separation, if she feels the same frustration with it as he does, because everything seemed just fine a few months before and now his father is living elsewhere.

“I’m going to the library after school,” Val says. Usually she stays there until Mitch is done with his workout or practice.

“It’s Friday, though, V. Don’t you want to do something with your friends?” he replies.

“Not really,” she says. “I have tests Monday and Tuesday.”

One thing he does know about Val is that she’s not the sort of person whose stance on something is often swayed once she’s taken it. He wants her to have a good time, but he also knows it isn’t worth the effort trying to explain to her that just about everyone would be at the game that night.

“Fair enough,” he says. “You’ve got all weekend to study though.”

“Not really,” she says. “We have a match tomorrow. And then there’s the church event on Sunday.”

For a moment Mitch feels bad for forgetting she has a tennis match the next day. He tells himself he’s been too focused on his own game, and that’s his reason for forgetting. On the other hand, anything church-related he forgets about quickly and without regret. He thinks football is religion enough for him.

“I gotcha,” he says. They pull into the school parking lot. “Well, I probably won’t see you till after the game tonight then.”

She says, “Yep, probably not. Maybe at lunch though. Thanks for driving.” And she hops out of the car with her backpack and walks ahead of him into school.

Mitch is all set to doze through his classes that day. On game days his mind is always in a haze. He can’t focus in class or on conversation with classmates. He can’t focus on anything besides football. He’s lost in his own thoughts about plays, coaches, teammates, opponents, the weather, fans, talent scouts from colleges.

“Mr. Hodges, are you with us?” His math teacher’s voice seems to appear out of nowhere. It startles Mitch. The teacher is one with a reputation for yelling. He’s scary enough that people listen to him just because they’re afraid they’ll get yelled at if they don’t. Mitch mumbles a yes, and tries to focus. He can feel his skin heat up as he grows frustrated with his inability to focus. His thoughts are out of his control.

“Mr. Hodges!” The teacher’s exclamation jolts him awake again. Mitch feels a few glares from classmates at surrounding desks. Others turn their heads down, trying to

avoid looking at trouble directly in the face. “I need you focused! How are we going to make sure you’re focused?”

Mitch feels his face turn red. He wants to say that he’s very focused, just not on math. He wants to say, I understand your concern, Mr. Griffin, but how can you expect me to focus on plotting quadratic equations when it’s game day? But he says nothing, because he isn’t sure if he’s even supposed to answer the question.

“What we’re going to do is,” Mr. Griffin says, “you come to the board, and you teach. Sound good? Since you must already know this stuff anyway, right? I can only assume as much, with you not paying any attention and all.”

Mitch can hardly believe it. If he could have imagined a nightmare scenario for how his day of classes would go, maybe he would have imagined this. He had always been terrified of getting up in front of the class. His hands always trembled. He worries now that his classmates will see them tremble. Giving presentations was more manageable though, because he’d prepared for them. The truth is, he didn’t know the first thing about quadratic equations, not yet at least. It isn’t that the material is over his head. It’s just that he hasn’t been able to keep his head in the same place long enough to learn it. He’d been noticing this in his other classes too, over the past couple of weeks. Two weeks earlier, at practice, he made a vicious open-field tackle on Frankie Kendrick, one of their wide receivers, by planting his helmet directly into Frankie’s chest protector, knocking him on his back instantly. It was technically an illegal hit - never lead with your helmet, he’d been told by his coaches several times - but the loud pop! of the hit got everyone fired up. One coach ran up to him afterward and told him never to tackle like

that again. And then he slapped Mitch on the helmet, but it almost felt more like an applauding gesture than a scolding one. It seemed like the coach was actually impressed with the tackle. So everything seemed fine at the time. Frankie wasn't hurt. But Mitch feels like his mind has been cloudier every since. He wonders if he'd been concussed. He'd felt a bit dizzy, shaky even. It wasn't so bad that he felt like he had to tell anyone about it, though.

Mr. Griffin says, "Well? We don't have all day, Hodges!"

Mitch can feel himself shaking now. Trembling. He isn't afraid of Griffin. Why should he be? Hell with him.

"You get up here now, Hodges, before I send you out of my class!"

Mitch weighs his options. He doesn't know the material. He could get up in front of the class and embarrass himself, or he could just sit still and refuse to go up there. He only has two options then. He chooses the latter. He sits very still and waits for his punishment.

"That's it, Hodges!" Mr. Griffin nearly shouts. "I won't have you in my classroom! Go to the counselor!"

Mitch shuffles out with his things.

The counselor's door is open when Mitch arrives. Mitch walks right in, sits down. Mitch thinks about how the counselor is an oddly proportioned man. He has these thick, fleshy cheeks, but the rest of his body is thin. His arms look like pencils. Mitch assumes he's about fifty, but he could've been off by a decade in either direction. The counselor always wears the same polo shirt, in either maroon or white, the school colors. Mitch

thinks that's goofy. School pride in general seems goofy to him. He wears his jersey to school on game days because it's the team's tradition, but if it were up to him he wouldn't wear it. Black t-shirt and jeans is what he would wear, like he did every other day. He tells himself it's one less thing he has to think about, one less choice he has to make each day by always wearing the same thing. It isn't that he's lazy, he tells himself. Just being economical with his energy.

The counselor says, "Hey there, Mitch. How are you?"

Mitch says, "I'm fine." Mitch isn't in the mood to talk, even though he knows that he'll have to at some point.

"Mitch, I want you to do something for me, okay?"

"Sure, okay."

"I need you to focus on your classes, Mitch. I know you love to play football. But class comes first. I've been getting reports about you."

Mitch is surprised to hear that. He knows he hasn't gotten in trouble in any other class.

"Teachers are saying that you seem out of it. Your grades are falling, Mitch. You need to shape up."

Mitch didn't really know about that, about the grades slipping. Well, maybe a little bit, compared with the spring. But it's fall, it's football season, so of course his grades are going to slip a little bit.

"And you won't play in college if you don't have the grades."

College feels a long ways off for Mitch. He knows he wants to play in college. His father played, so did his uncle, and two of his cousins. It's practically family tradition. He never really questions it. What else is there for him? His grades are dropping, and they weren't all that high to begin with. Football is going to need to be his ticket to college.

"Is there something else that's bothering you, Mitch? Something at home? You can talk to me about it."

Mitch stays silent. He hasn't talked to anyone about his parents' separation since it happened over the summer, hasn't even really talked to Val about it, except when he heard her crying in the bathroom one night, and when she came out he told her some B.S. about them needing to be strong for their parents now. He didn't know what else to say. He thought it sounded like the right thing for a big brother to say at the time. The more he thinks about it the more it seems like their separation really doesn't have anything to do with him or Val. That makes it all the more frustrating, being uninvolved, watching the family fall apart without being able to do a thing about it.

"Well, we don't have to talk about it now. You can come see me anytime. I know Griffin can be a hothead sometimes, but try not to get kicked out of his class again, alright?"

"Okay," Mitch says softly. "Thank you."

"You can head on over to lunch a bit early."

Mitch says thank you again. He makes it halfway to the dining hall before he realizes he's crying, thick, glistening tears of frustration at life for breaking his family up without warning. He wipes the tears off quickly, hoping no one can see him cry.

He gets to the stadium about two hours before game time.

"Nothing changes tonight, men!" Coach barks at him and the rest of the team as they sit into the locker room and start putting on their equipment. "Same preparation as always! Keep doing what got us here." It sounds nice in theory, but even if Mitch pretends it's just another game, he can't hide the fact that he's nervous as hell. Having Coach yell at them only makes it worse. He's the kind of coach that takes out his own frustration and nervousness on the players whenever he can. One time a player showed up late to a game, five minutes before kickoff. Of course he got benched for that game, but Coach benched him for the next game too, and at practices in between he had him running laps until his legs were Jell-O.

Mitch and his teammates have been looking forward to this game all year long, because it's a rivalry game with the other high school in their town and the last game of the regular season, one final chance to pad their records before the playoffs. Each team has eight wins, and while both teams will get a chance to play in the postseason, capping the regular season off with another win means a higher seed in the playoffs and theoretically an easier road to the championship game. The chance to improve the odds of success in the seniors' last try at a state title is exciting, sure, but Mitch has had this date circled on his calendar for months now because it's the first time in high school that he's

played against two of his closest friends from elementary school. Back when they were kids, Mitch, Patrick, and Jordan spent all their free time on one playing field or another. Mitch loves the idea of playing against old friends because the competitive atmosphere seems to melt away, putting him right back to where they started: a few kids passing autumn evenings together tossing the football around.

However, as the game plays itself out, this image of childhood reverie is clearly not the one Patrick and Jordan held in mind before kickoff that night; the two of them, along with every one of their teammates, seem to be out for blood. Mitch assumes the opposing team's coaching staff has something to do with this craving for violence—one of only a handful of images Mitch will recall later from that game is the web of thick blue veins popping out of the head coach's neck as he screamed at his players to hit Mitch and teammates even harder. There are a few reasons why a team would employ such a strategy, none of which really correlates to playing well as a team. Maybe they're hoping to decimate Mitch's team with injuries, weakening their chances at a victory that night and in the playoff games to follow. Or maybe they're trying to teach them a lesson, that under their watch there's no way they were going to let their cross-town rival finish the season with a better record.

Whatever the case, many of the other team's players command the role of bounty hunter effectively, the result being a host of dislocated knees and shoulders—one of those shoulders being George's, the starting quarterback of Mitch's team—by halftime. Mitch's team leads by two touchdowns at that point, but you wouldn't have known it by the behavior of the opposing team, who sprint out of the locker room after halftime with



spirits high, as if their kick-off returner had just ran the full length of the field for a touchdown. Perhaps it's worth celebrating that George will no longer be picking their defense apart, at least on that evening, and that Mitch will be moving over from his regular position at wide receiver to take George's place at quarterback. As the second-string quarterback, up to that point Mitch had only called three plays that entire year, two of which were quarterback kneels, meant for running the clock out as a showing of mercy to the opponents.

Mitch's role is pretty simple: don't turn the ball over or do anything that might jeopardize the lead. His team had already had plenty of success running the ball, so they are going to stick with a series of handoffs and bootlegs, where the quarterback fakes the handoff and runs with the ball himself, and hope that one or a few of those plays results in a big gain while they push the game clock toward expiration. One expects the passer to pass, so any play in which the quarterback moves the ball ahead on foot can be devastating on account of its deception; the main concern, however, is being left vulnerable to a linebacker's vicious tackle, and since quarterbacks aren't typically built in the same way as bruising tailbacks and fullbacks, these kinds of hits can cause severe injury.

But a fair bit of the deception typically characteristic of the bootleg vanishes when the quarterback has only attempted one pass all year. Their offense in the third quarter relies heavily on James, their running back who seems to be made only of muscle and can typically barrel down the field like an errant steel beam. The strategy is simply to give the ball to him and get out of his way. The approach is only minimally successful,

however, largely due to the fact that the element of surprise, on which their ability to score depends so heavily, has now completely vanished. Their opponents no longer have to guess what play is coming; instead they just bunch themselves at the line of scrimmage and wait until Mitch calls for the snap to make a beeline for James. And they aren't just trying to tackle him: each would-be tackler goes crashing into him at full force, often lowering the shoulder or aiming in the direction of his knee pads, and if one defender happens to miss, there's another one hurtling up the field right behind him. It's a wonder to Mitch and his teammates how James is handling these successive collisions completely unfazed, springing to his feet after each one, ready to take the ball again. Despite his Herculean effort, they have to adjust our strategy, as the third quarter concludes without it yielding any points in their favor, and they'd surrendered a touchdown, thinning their lead to seven. Attempting a few passes seems like their next best option. And it might've worked if their linemen weren't entirely exhausted from trying to suppress the unrelenting stream of defenders rushing toward them each play. The quarterback bootleg is going to be their last and best option, their only chance at keeping the lead, which they seem to have been hanging onto by a thread ever since the teams re-emerged from the locker rooms at halftime.

The hit comes at the start of the fourth quarter. Mitch fakes a handoff to James and takes off in the direction of the sideline, gaining only a few yards before the crown of Patrick's helmet comes flying into the side of his own, the surprise of the impact playing almost as much of a role in bringing him to the ground as the sheer force of it did. Mitch spins around in an awkward 360-degree turn before rattling to rest face up, and as he falls

through the air he experiences a strange mixture of feelings that range from the euphoria of weightlessness to the shock of betrayal, though knowing how docile Patrick had always been, Mitch feels sure that his friend was just following coach's orders, that he took no real pleasure in such a malicious tackle.

"Patrick," Mitch coughs out his name in little more than a whisper, reaching his hand up toward him for a lift up, though his hand doesn't seem to want to raise up as high as he intends it to.

"Mitch, get up," Patrick whispers back to him but in a much firmer tone. "Get up!" He's trying to avoid helping Mitch up, a gesture that wouldn't fit in with his team's bounty hunter mentality. His teammates must think he's adding insult to injury after knocking Mitch down and then taunting him. A couple of them swarm over to join in.

"That's right, bitch!" The same remark seems to come in unison from the two of them, though it could've been that Mitch's hearing is temporarily distorted. "Stay down!" The conflicting nature of these commands confuses Mitch. Staying down sounds much more pleasant than getting up; though his team needs him to get up, and despite the danger that staying in the game imposes on his health, he knows that he isn't going to sub himself out.

A couple of plays later, a couple more vicious blows to the chest and abdomen, and Mitch is out: not out of the game, but out like the friend you always have to take care of after the party, the one who never knows when to stop drinking. Later Mitch's teammates will tell him that he was finally removed from the game because he could no longer form the words necessary to call a play in the huddle. He sits on the bench in a

daze for the remainder of the game, while the third-string quarterback takes the rest of the snaps. Eventually the clock expires, and as they file back into the locker room, Mitch asks his teammates if they had won, asking repeatedly because no one will answer him, though a quick assessment of their downtrodden expressions—and the loud, boastful nature of the opposing team’s exit from the stadium—should’ve answered his question.

His sister Val was quite possibly as confused as he was right after he’d been tackled. She’d attended every one of Mitch’s games, even when she was still in middle school and her friends hadn’t been interested in going to see a bunch of random boys charging up and down a field and smashing into one another. She’d been puzzled by the collision because it looked and sounded just like a dozen others, when one second Mitch had been running with the ball and the next he’d been knocked to the ground. She knew something was amiss, however, when he was unable to return to the game or even remove himself from the field without the help of a teammate. That, for her, was an entirely novel occurrence.

Shortly after Mitch went to the sidelines, Val descended the bleachers to escape the crowd noise and called her mother at the office, where she was working late, telling her Mitch was injured and that it might be serious this time. Val only knew a handful of player-parents, all by way of her mother, and she thought it was possible that the ones in her immediate vicinity had forgotten who she was, because they were starting to whisper things about Mitch without paying any attention to her, saying things like “That can’t be good” and “He’ll be out for the rest of tonight and maybe next week, too.” There was no

precedent for Mitch being removed from a game on account of an injury, let alone an exit from a game with the likelihood of also missing the following one. His sister had seen him play through facial gashes, broken fingers, even torn ligaments (he'd been unaware of the torn ligaments until at least an hour after it occurred, at which point he'd succeeded in finishing the game). She did not know what a concussion was, because as far as she knew, her brother had never had one before. She was scared now, almost to the point of tears, though she fought them relentlessly, fearing she'd draw attention to herself in that crowd of near-strangers.

Val met her mother in the parking lot when she arrived from work, and soon after the physical trainer would accompany Mitch out to the lot, where Val would have to wave and then shout to let them know where they were, even though they were standing in front of the car, which was parked in plain view from the well-lit exit of the stadium. Only later would Mitch's inability to spot out his family in the already-diminishing crowd register as a possible cause for concern right off the bat; however, for the time being his sister and mother were just glad to see that he was walking in their direction without needing assistance. The trainer would then heap upon them a list of instructions for handling Mitch and his injury, all of which seemed to amount to a prescription of complete rest, both mentally and physically. Mitch was hardly paying attention to him as he listed these directives, though Val and Katy figured it was because he'd heard them already. And on the ride home, nothing seemed terribly different to Val: Mitch was oftentimes completely silent after losing a game, and his absent, glazed-over eyes staring out the window could have been an expression of his feeling of defeat.

After the game concludes and his mother and sister have driven him home and helped him into the shower and dried him off and put him into bed, sleep proves elusive for Mitch, and he remains in a hazy state of half-slumber for several hours, his dreams feeling less like dreams than actual occurrences: the images are blurry and the sounds are muffled, but he feels just like he's back on the field after the collision, lying prostrate on the ground, full of the desire to get up and return to the huddle but lacking the physical power to do so. He can hear shouts from teammates and coaches, and though he can't make out exact words it seems that they're yelling at him to get up, berating him for letting the team down when they needed him most, and the thought of failing them disturbs him almost as deeply as the fear of being unable to move his own body like he's used to.

## **Diamonds**

There was a strange ritual she relied on before a match: one quick heave to momentarily release the tension and anxiety that built up for weeks at a time. At first she thought she'd just experiment with it, pulled the trigger before a playoff match when the nerves were especially unbearable, but because she won, the ritual became part of her success. She couldn't stop doing it. It was her chosen method of nerve management. Tennis created a need for one: the sport was everything in her life, certainly in her home life. She lived alone with her father, her official coach since freshman year of high school, her unofficial one since kindergarten. The demands of her sport and the demands of her father merged to create this unnamable, suffocating presence. She desperately wanted to escape from it.

Her father didn't discover her ritual until she'd been doing it for over a year. It was before the first match of the season her junior year. She knew that was the year college coaches could start recruiting her—if she played well enough. It was close to match time, and he'd been wondering where she went until he found her bent over a toilet in the locker room bathroom. He told her it was okay to be nervous, she was nervous because she cared. “No pressure, no diamonds,” he told her as he wiped a fleck of vomit from her cheek with a handful of paper towels, somehow thinking it was appropriate in this moment to remind her of the state championship rings he'd won as a coach, proudly displayed in a glass case on the mantel in their living room. He always praised her for her

intensity. He said she cared about a tennis match like the mortgage on their house was on the line. Somehow he hadn't tried to lecture her on how unhealthy this ritual of hers might be. Might've expected him to, considering he was her coach, and by nature of the job was responsible for making sure she and the rest of the team stayed as healthy as the sport allowed. But that was her father: tennis was always the first thing, oftentimes the only thing. If she hadn't lost her mother to cancer before she had the opportunity to really know her, Lucy would have asked her this: how did she stand it? How did she stand living with someone who showed all his passion for a sport and none for anything else? He was still the same father he was when she was five, when he started her with tennis. At the neighborhood court, he'd bark directions at her as she sent the ball flying back toward him every now and then but most of the time off to the sides of the court. Keep your knees bent, he'd tell her. You've got to keep your eye on the ball, Lucy. Now she was eighteen. She could have sworn he said both those things in practice the day before. And here they were, sitting in the locker room after the last match of her senior year, and he was still trying to lecture her on fundamentals.

“Like I said earlier,” he told her, “you were dipping your shoulder, you were missing the ball, not hitting it like you should.”

What else could he even talk about? She'd lost. Nothing was going to change that. And honestly, she was surprised at how unbothered she was by the loss. She took defeats more harshly as a kid, shutting herself in her room for several hours after losing. Now she had the opposite impulse. She had no interest in dwelling on the loss for another second. She was done with tennis, her father, the whole school. Not that she had much of a



relationship with the school anyway. She spent more time preparing for matches than exams, she always went to bed early on the weekends instead of going out. She was warmed by the fact that, without her father knowing, she'd packed all of her belongings into her truck the night before. Everything she owned, ready to fly down the highway with her, destination to be determined. She had a friend at the university two hours west, figured she could stay with her until she figured out a plan. She needed time to think. She could never think when she was around her father.

Lucy said, "I told you, I was concentrating on it. She was just too quick." It was true: her opponent moved faster side to side than anyone she'd faced all year, and she had a powerful cross-court finisher that kept Lucy honest, kept her from playing as aggressively as she normally did. "There wasn't time to think about my shoulder or hardly anything else."

"I don't wanna hear that," he replied. "You know this game is about you against you and no one else."

"Was," she said, for the moment resisting the urge to raise her voice at him. "The game was. Not is. It's over now. I'm done."

"The hell d'you mean done? You had a great season, now it's time to rest a bit before we get back to work."

How was she going to tell him it was over? Her career was over, whether he liked it or not. She wanted to tell him about how the court where they ran countless drills found its way into her dreams almost nightly, the fear of anticipating what might happen out there on match day often keeping her up at night. She'd lie there in her bed, covered in

runny sweat, her heart pounding as if she were running sprints. In a recurring dream she places a water and towel on the bench, cranes her gaze around the linesman's stand for a glimpse of her opponent. She knows everything there is to know about her, because the opponent is herself, except stronger in every way. The other version of herself puts her serve where she wants to put it, every single time. She never hits her forehand into the net. Even when she does make an error, she shows zero frustration. The match ends quickly, a victory in straight sets for Dream Lucy. They meet at the net to shake hands, then Lucy looks off into the crowd for her father. Every time he's gone, disappeared. Why does she always look for him? There were so many matches in real life when she wished he wasn't anywhere near the court. On the court—and off it—she could never keep his voice out of her head. Maybe it wasn't him she wanted to run from, but only his voice. Maybe she didn't want to run away from him forever, just long enough to get his voice out of her head, or at least long enough for her to find the difference between his voice and her own.

She said, "I don't want to play anymore, Dad. I'm tired. I'm eighteen years old and I'm already tired of life! How is that okay?"

He was silent for a while, longer than she could ever remember him pausing in a conversation. He was always filling the gaps in their conversations, always with something tennis-related. She wondered if he did this because he couldn't stand silence, and if that silence reminded him of the absence of her mother. Her mother had been gone for so long now but Lucy knew her father still felt the loss of her, knew he always would. It was different for him, though. It wasn't that Lucy didn't feel her absence. It was the

opposite: the lack of her was the only thing about her mother that she could feel. How could she tell this to her father?

He said, "I didn't know you felt that way, Luce. I never wanted that. It's just... you know I've never been one for big picture thinking. Certainly not around the court." He cleared his throat. "All I know is there's college tennis in your future if you just keep working at it. We've come so far. We're not gonna give it all up now, are we?"

"I don't want to talk about that now, Dad. I don't want to talk about that until I'm ready. I don't care if that means I waste the opportunity. And if that were only true around the court, what you said about big picture thinking," she said, "that would be one thing. But we never talk about anything else! What else do we talk about? What else do we talk about besides this stupid game?"

She didn't realize she was shouting at him until she heard the echo of her voice. His eyes widened, blood drained from his face. It was strange to see him that way, frozen in fear. Suddenly she felt she was punishing him for something he didn't do. As her coach he could give her nearly everything. As her father he seemed to have reached his limit, maybe he'd reached it a long time ago.

She said, "I need to leave for a while, Dad. I don't know how long."

She thought he would react instantly, but instead he paused, took in a big breath. "Will you call me?" he asked her. "When you've cooled off and had a chance to actually use your head?"

"Yes," she said. She started putting one foot in front of the other toward the parking lot. When she stepped outside she immediately felt the sun burning her neck and

ears. She thought she heard her father behind her, but she kept walking. When she got into her truck, she realized her hands were shaking. She looked back toward the front door of the locker room, some part of her hoping to see her father emerge from it. He didn't. She drove slowly out of the parking lot, rolling down the windows, some part of her hoping to hear his voice shouting after her. But she only heard the sound of the truck's engine. The last thing she saw as she pulled away from the school was her father's truck. It was the last remaining vehicle in the lot.

## **The Player's Son**

Nathan Piscatelli was the kind of student, even in seventh grade, who would ask other students what grade they got on a recent test not because he genuinely cared to congratulate them on a success or console them in their failure; instead, he wanted a means of comparison to his own score—if the student he asked told him a score that was higher than his own, he stayed silent; if the score was lower, he was equally silent, but was unable to stifle the grin that took form on his face, the taste of victory sweeter than soft-serve ice cream, the blend of vanilla and chocolate (always the perfectly crafted swirl) he ate after every cafeteria lunch (except on game days, since his coach told him that sweets would make him jumpy and mess up his swing).

It was a Saturday in late May. Their final game of the spring season, the season when Nate played with his classmates (in the summer he traveled around the Midwest playing tournaments for a team assembled with players from all around the city) was scheduled for that afternoon. That day Nate wasn't feeling his best: he had a sore throat, his nose was runny, and his brain was still in a fog from studying for five different final exams over the course of that week (Spanish, English, Algebra, World History, and the dreaded General Science). It was his first year of middle school, and so it was his first year of final exams. He had survived them all. Still, he was a bit peeved that studying for them meant his energy was sapped on game day. He was the sort of kid who could memorize all of the material in preparation for the test a handful of days before it. If he

were instead the sort of kid who carefully meted out his study time in reasonable dosages throughout the duration of each course to allow himself plenty of time to grasp the concepts, maybe he wouldn't have had to suffer through two straight weeks of solitary confinement to his bedroom—except for breaks to practice hitting in the batting cage in his backyard—firmly planted at his desk, flipping through the flashcards he made for each exam. Each night he would start with algebra, since he felt it required his freshest mind; next came science, though most of the time he wanted to skip that one entirely; third was English, which he almost viewed as a reward, since he found that his mind readily accepted stories and firmly rejected equations, theories, postulates, and principles; fourth was Spanish, which always made him crave a bedtime snack; last was history because it never failed to put him to sleep. He was glad he wouldn't have to even look at another flashcard or textbook or even a pencil until August. He hid his bookbag under his bed so he wouldn't even have to look at it until school started back up again.

When he walked into the dugout, his equipment bag felt twice its normal weight on his back—it felt like he was carrying all the team's batting helmets and the catcher's gear, even though he was only saddled with his two bats (one for practice before the game, one for the game itself), his two gloves (one for infield, one for outfield), and his cleats. He hung the bag up on the chain link fence behind the wooden bench, clipping it into a link with the carabiner attached to the top of the bag, then removed his cleats from his bag and sat down on the bench with them, and in doing so he thought he felt a splinter on his ass—a chip of a wooden bench fell to the ground as he brushed it from the seat of his pants. Had to be more careful next time, damn bench was more dangerous than

waiting for the throw from the catcher down at second with a stealing base-runner heading straight for you and ready slide into you with his metal cleats face-up and ready to dig into the palm of your open hand.

“Hey Frankie,” Nate shouted down to the other end of the dugout, “when the hell’s the school gonna break the bank and get us a new goddamn bench, huh?”

Frankie was looking at the lineup card, which their coach had pinned up on the fence next to the empty doorframe that served as the entrance and exit from the playing field, searching for his name somewhere in the starting lineup. If the coach had been watching the same games they were playing, Frankie’s name probably shouldn’t have been anywhere near the lineup—the kid couldn’t make contact with the broad side of a barn these past couple of weeks, and deserved to ride that rickety pine bench for all of the first game and a good chunk of the second, maybe catch a few splinters on his rear while he was at it, too. And worse, their previous game had ultimately been decided on a fielding error Frankie made. It was hard not to feel bad for the kid. It was hard to sympathize with him, though, him being the principal’s son. Fraternizing with the enemy, some would call it.

“Oh, my bad, Nate,” Frankie shouted back, “that’ll be the first thing I ask pops at the dinner table tonight, you betcha. Anything else you want me to ask him about, Nathaniel? Maybe he can help bump up that science grade of yours.” Frankie and Nate sat next to each other in science and Nate hadn’t managed to beat his score on a test all year; not that Nate’s scores were awful but they certainly weren’t top of the class, which is ultimately what frustrated him the most about the class, even more than the extra work

he had to put in just to understand the material—if he couldn't be the best or damn near it then he saw no point in trying.

“Jesus, Frank. I was only kidding,” Nate said, turning his attention to putting on his cleats. Before every game he tied and untied them, tied and untied them again, then tied them a third time and kept them tied—third time was always a charm. “Loosen up a bit. If you weren't so tight all the time maybe your bat would actually find the ball once in a while.”

“Thanks, Nate, just what I needed,” Frankie spat back at him and charged out onto the field to warm up, and Nate almost felt bad for taking a shot at the kid's hitting abilities—or complete lack thereof—so close to game time. All he meant to do, at least initially, was give him a bit of a hard time for being the principal's kid, just like everyone else did, but maybe he came off sounding malicious, or maybe Frankie was damn near fed up with getting a hard time for being the principal's kid—maybe fed up with being the principal's kid in general—and that was why he snapped back at Nate. It was hard to tell. Nate didn't want to be the sort of kid who does something just because everybody else was doing it, that wasn't in his character or at least the sort of character he aspired to. Their coach had been talking lately about wanting to have guys on his team who had “character”—doing what no one else did, never cutting corners, putting your teammates' successes above your own. Etcetera.

“Listen, Frankie, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to piss you off back there,” Nate said once he'd charged out to the outfield to warm-up with Frankie and the rest of the guys—jogging in place, stretching their arms, doing leg lunges, and, for the real tough guys like



Sean P., pre-game push-ups and sit-ups. The other guys always told Sean P. it was a waste of energy to do those before a game, that he should save his strength and do the push-ups and sit-ups another day or at least after the game, to which he always said he liked doing them and he wasn't going to stop doing them just because it made him a little tired, he said he hit better when he was a little tired anyway, it made him focus a bit harder, and to that no one had much of a counter-argument because Sean P. could hit—now there was a guy whose name should never be left out of the lineup, in fact it should always be right smack in the middle of it, or right near the top. Near, the operative word there—Nate was the leadoff hitter, always had been for every team he played on. He loved seeing his last name first on the lineup card, loved being the first one to face the opposing pitcher and figure out all the opposing pitcher's tendencies—like if he wiggled his glove before he threw a curveball or scratched his nose before he threw a changeup—and then report back to the dugout (after he got his base hit and promptly scored the first run, of course) and tell his teammates all about that pitcher. “First up and first in, that's what I need from you, Piscatelli,” Coach once told Nate. Coach always called players by their last names, just as they showed up on the lineup card. Nate made sure he was the first run in—if one of his teammates scored the first run, he couldn't help it, even though he knew he should be happy for the guy, he'd get pissed because he wanted to score that first run himself.

“No worries, Nate,” Frankie said, seeming as if he wasn't quite ready to accept the apology, but he said no more, because out from the dugout came Coach Rodrigues, jogging toward them in his jumpsuit, the sound of his pant legs swishing against each

other growing louder as he approached. Coach was the sort of guy who always ran on the balls of his feet; Coach was also the sort of guy who suffered from crippling back pain, particularly after the days he pitched in his own games—at thirty-eight he'd been was one of the older players on the roster for the local semi-pro team, and recently he'd finally listened to his body which had repeatedly told him to quit the abuse and just be a coach. Coach Rodrigues was someone who would never be able to leave the game entirely. He played part of one season in the big leagues, The Show, and that taste of coffee was enough to leave him with an endless craving for another sip, even if he knew deep down that one sip was all he was ever going to get. Despite how brief it was, Coach Rodrigues' career meant the guys looked at him and listened to him in a different sort of a way than they did with Coach Randy, the assistant coach. Though Randy did teach American history at the high school most of the boys would go to, so he commanded another sort of respect—most of these seventh graders were in awe of him because high school sounded like a far-off and exotic place.

“Alright, men,” Coach Rodrigues bellowed, always refusing to call his players “boys,” even though the oldest of them was fourteen—that was Reid J., whose proudest moment in life so far was eating four Jimmy John's sandwiches in one sitting. “Here's the starting lineup.” And after hearing that, they all gathered around their coach in excitement, waiting to hear where their name might be called. Nate crowded in with the rest of them but did so with a bit less anticipation since he knew his name would be called out first—and sure enough “Piscatelli, center field” was the first thing out of Coach's mouth. “Now don't get discouraged if you didn't hear your name just now,”

Coach said after he finished reading the lineup. “Can’t have that negative energy floating around in the dugout and wafting out onto the playing field. If you didn’t hear your name you better believe you’re gonna hear it in the later innings of the game when we need a pinch hitter to drive in a go-ahead run or a relief pitcher to come in and hold the lead. Always gotta be ready, men. Alright. Here we go. Time to lock in. Gonna be some tough competition out there today, I promise you that.” Nate knew plenty about the opposing team—bunch of their players were on his summer team the year before, so he knew their tendencies already, had already told his teammates earlier in the week about number 22, Parker G., a pitcher who threw about as slow as any pitcher they faced all year but certainly had one of the better curveballs they were likely to see, and number 7, Dwayne B., a powerful outfielder who’d been lifting weights for two years already and was the only kid to hit a homerun all summer at their practice field, which was above average size for a high school field. It was going to be sweet, beating the guys from his other team. On the way back into the dugout to get some water before the warm-up, Nate caught up with Frankie, who, after not hearing his name called, was moping like they’d already lost the game. Negative energy already wafting onto the field. Nate wouldn’t have it.

“Hey, Frankie,” Nate said, clapping him on the middle of his back—Frankie was one of the taller guys on the team and Nate would’ve barely been able to reach his shoulder to give him a friendly slap there. “Chin up, kid. We might need you in there later in the game, when it really counts.” Nate immediately regretted wedging the word “might” in there as soon as he said it. “Definitely going to need your glove out there in the field,” he added. It was true—Frankie could play excellent defense. In fact, Nate

couldn't remember Frankie making an error in the field all season, impressive for a first baseman, where you're called on to secure the ball in your mitt maybe more often than any other position besides the catcher. Truth was, though, if you couldn't hit you wouldn't play, even in middle school, so Frankie was stuck on the pine half the time, and as long as he kept swinging the baseball bat like he was bringing an axe down on a tree stump, he was going to continue leading the league in strikeouts.

"Thanks, buddy," Frankie said, and Nate tensed up a bit because he hated being called "buddy," always felt like he was being talked down to when someone called him "buddy," but the thanks seemed genuine. "Just wish I could hit like you."

Nate blushed. The only thing sweeter to him than his stroke at the plate was someone stroking his ego. And he knew it, too—he didn't think of himself as an arrogant person but he took pride in being a cocky sonuvabitch when he got between the lines. During a game he would tell himself things like "your swing is as smooth as kimono silk!" before he went to the plate or "this train's bound for third!" when he hit one down the line and got it in his mind right away that he was making it to third base for a triple.

"Thanks Frank. Helps having a batting cage in your backyard, I gotta say." Nate tried to play it off, like he was good for some other reason than the fact that at age twelve he was already that perfect balance of speed, strength and coordination that enables someone to hit a round ball squarely more times than not. He knew he was good, and he didn't need anyone else to tell him he was good for him to know it, but it didn't feel so bad having someone reaffirm it - his talent - every now and then. He didn't get so much of that affirmation playing with his summer team—all the players on his summer team

were either as good as he was or they thought they were, which meant none of them spent much time patting each other on the back. It was more like a list of individuals than an actual team, an assembly of players who were honing their skills so they could make their varsity teams as soon as they entered high school and then, another four years down the road, earn spots on college teams—if going to high school sounded like an exotic destination then going to college sounded practically like space travel, and these boys were endlessly fascinated by the idea, so much so that they didn't have any words to express their enthusiasm for it. All they had to go on, anyway, was the secondhand experience related to them by George's older brother, who was a sophomore at the state university two hours west of their town, and not an athlete—he studied engineering, which Nate thought sounded like just about the most boring thing ever, even if it meant George's brother would have a steady and high-paying job right out of school. The only job Nate had even considered was playing baseball. Frankie would never consider playing baseball as a job, certainly wouldn't ever get the opportunity to do so; in fact, Nate thought Frankie would struggle to make the high school team, but there was something about Frankie's situation that made Nate want to help him out with his game. Maybe it was guilt for ribbing Frankie about being the principal's kid, just like everyone else did; maybe it was that the kid struggled mightily at the sport but was so damn determined not to; maybe it was Coach Rodrigues' words about "character" and "energy" and "aura" and something or things called "*cajones*" that made Nate want to do something positive for his teammate, something that would help toughen him up a bit. "That makes me think, Frank, I'll be hitting in my cage damn near every day this

summer, you oughta join me sometime. Or all the time, I don't care. This summer is all baseball for me, wouldn't mind having some company in the journey. My summer teammates are a bunch of stiffs, all of 'em."

Frankie could hardly believe his ears—their star player asking him to work out with him. He didn't have to think twice about it. "Hell yeah Nate!" he blurted, realizing he sounded more excited than what would be deemed cool in that moment, but hardly making an effort to contain that excitement. "I mean, I'd love to. We should do that. Definitely do that."

So that was the summer that Nate worked out with Frankie. Every Tuesday and Thursday - Nate had team practice Mondays and Wednesdays, and games Friday through Sunday - Frankie's mother would drop him off at Nate's house, and the two would spend at least an hour and sometimes two just hitting non-stop—they would start by hitting off a batting tee, one guy setting the ball for the other, and the hitter would try to drive the ball off the tee so it would hit the back of the net, no groundballs, only line drives. Frankie's first round on the tee on that first Tuesday, he made more contact with the tee than he did with the ball - Nate thought to himself that he wasn't at all surprised - but by the second week he wasn't hitting the tee anymore and by the third week he was even stringing a few line drives in a row, peppering the back net so the ball would hit the net and then dribble a few feet back toward their direction, which didn't compare to the kind of force Nate applied to the ball - his line drives hit the net with so much power they came bouncing back quickly so the two would sometimes have to get out of the way of it - but it was something, a noticeable improvement no doubt. The kid was a long way from

varsity material but Nate thought his friend might at least have a shot at making varsity before he graduated. Nate felt like he was doing something good, helping Frankie out like he was on his off days. Thought it couldn't hurt his luck on game days, him doing a good deed and all. No sir, couldn't hurt a bit. Coach said this game was one-third about luck, the second third was talent and the last third was hard work, so Nate figured he had all his ducks lined up if he could get luck on his side. The first month of the summer season Nate had been hitting the ball well but didn't have so many hits to show for it - just bad luck, he knew it, just happened to be a fielder in the exact position he hit the ball to more times than not, it seemed - but Nate figured his luck had to turn soon enough, with him doing this charity work with Frankie and all.

It was the Thursday before the biggest tournament of the summer so far. Frankie was on his way over to Nate's when a huge rainstorm tore through the area, wiping out any possibility that the boys would practice that day, and putting the start of the tournament - scheduled for the next morning - in jeopardy. Nate wasn't thrilled about the weather but he wasn't particularly annoyed by it either—no matter how much a kid loved baseball there was the something about the possibility of a rainout that made that kid a little giddy inside, like the way even the most successful students felt about snow days. Frankie's mother dropped him off at Nate's at the start of her lunch break from the office at school - her school was not the middle school where the boys went but the junior college in town, where she worked as a receptionist - and told him she would pick him at the end of the day as usual, her day shorter in the summer, so end of the day meant three.

The rain was so bad, though, that she wouldn't be able to make it back until early evening. The two boys would have to entertain themselves—without the structure that their batting practice provided—for a whole afternoon.

If he were being honest, Nate would have said he wished Frankie could have gone home at the regular time, a little before one in the afternoon when his mother returned to get him and drag him off to space camp if it was Tuesday and piano lesson if it was Thursday. It seemed that baseball was the only thing the two boys had in common, though in Frankie's defense, Nate would have only one thing in common with anyone - baseball - since that was the only thing, or at least it seemed this way, that occupied his mind. Stuck outside the friendly confines of the batting cage, where conversation revolved around hitting and sports-related small talk, the boys had to reach for other areas where their interests might meet. Frankie was finding difficulty with this.

“So, Nate,” Frankie asked him, “where's your dad this weekend?” It was well established knowledge among Nate's classmates and his teammates that his father was a former ballplayer, an especially good one - four-time all-star and one-time league leader in stolen bases - and had recently transitioned from a playing career to one in coaching, which during the summers meant the same thing it did when he was playing—he wasn't around the house much; in fact, now that he was a coach, he was around the house even less, since the team he coached for played their home games three hours away. At least when he was playing, he was playing for their hometown team, so when he wasn't on the road with the team, he was staying at home with Nate and Nate's step-mother.



“Arkansas,” Nate replied, only with mild interest, also realizing that he knew what state his father was in but didn’t know what town. It was hard to keep track—one weekend he could be in Arkansas, in Oklahoma the next one, then Nebraska, then Texas after that. He didn’t make it to many of Nate’s games. Nate wasn’t sure he didn’t prefer it that way—seemed like he could get four hits in four at-bats and his old man would still find something to critique about his swing. As good as his father was, Nate was determined to be even better than him—in fact, it may have been his biggest motivation, showing he was better than Nathan Piscatelli, Sr. in every facet of the game.

“Pretty cool, how your dad travels so much,” Frankie said. “My dad never traveled for work once in his life. Except if you count his job working as a postman—he says they used to send him to all corners of the county. But even that’s nothing like what your old man does.”

“I didn’t know your dad was a postman,” Nate replied, feeling like keeping Frankie’s father as the topic of discussion rather than his own. “You ever ask him if he ever barked back at any dogs?”

“Well, no. No, man, I haven’t. That’d be an awfully weird thing to do,” Frankie said, and his face puckered up like he just tasted something sour, though Nate could tell Frankie thought it was funny.

“I think that’s what I would do,” Nate said, “if any dog I didn’t know started barking at me for no reason. I’d just bark right back at that dog. Can’t reason with someone who can’t reason.”

“Makes sense, I guess,” Frankie said. “Speaking of, how come you don’t have a dog, Nate? Seems like every other friend of ours has a dog.” That was the first time Nate could remember Frankie referring to the two of them as friends, and even though he wasn’t sure they really were friends - all they did together was practice baseball, after all, hadn’t done anything else together up until this day - it felt good to be considered the friend of someone.

“I don’t know,” Nate lied, knowing exactly why it was that they didn’t have a dog. It wasn’t that anyone in his family was allergic to dogs, which he probably could have used as a reason why they didn’t have one. “Just never really wanted one, I guess.” That was the opposite of the truth: Nate asked his father if they could get one but he said no because he didn’t want anything at all getting in the way of Nate’s attention on baseball, and Nate supposed that yes, he was right, that having a dog to play with and walk and feed and show off to his friends wasn’t going to help him be a better baseball player but why couldn’t he have just this one thing that had nothing to do with the sport? It was so rare that his father was even around that Nate thought he could probably keep a dog in the house without him knowing, but his step-mother would obviously find out, and there was no keeping any secrets with his step-mother.

“I gotcha,” Frankie said. “I guess dogs aren’t for everyone. Let’s stop talking about ‘em, just talking about ‘em makes me wanna be back at home playing with Ike.” Ike was Frankie’s poodle. “He gets scared in storms, I hope he’s okay.”

“Yeah, me too,” Nate said, though he thought it might have sounded weird, him caring that much about a dog he only met once after a baseball game because Frankie’s

older sister brought Ike to the field with her. Nate wouldn't have even cared what kind of a dog he got, if he got one—he just knew that he wanted one.

“Anyway, what do you wanna do?” Frankie asked Nate. “My mom just texted me and said she won't be able to pick me up until five, at the earliest. She says the forecast says storms, big ones, until then. They have some fancy weather predicting equipment over there at the school. So chances are she's right.” Nate looked up at the “Beer O'Clock!” clock on the wall - they were hanging out in Nate's father's den, as Nate's father liked to call it - which showed a quarter after two.

“Video games?” Nate asked. He didn't think video games would be able to occupy three whole hours of their time, but the only other idea he could think of was a movie, and he wasn't in the mood for one. You had to be in the right mood for the kind of movies Nate liked - action flicks where every other scene had hand-to-hand combat, the appearance of a switch blade, someone getting shot in the arm, or some combination of the three - and he wasn't in it. Video games were a bit lower on the spectrum of expected excitability, though maybe only by a little bit.

“Sure, which one?” Frankie asked.

“Well, I've got Madden, NBA, MLB, FIFA...” Nate said, only realizing just then that he had almost exclusively sports games for his PlayStation. There was something crooked about this obsession with sports that was coming to define Nate—it was as if there was room for nothing else in Nate's mind. Sports were, or, in Nate's case, sport (baseball) was not simply the earth around which the moon revolved; it was the earth, the moon, the sun, the galaxy and the universe all melded into one big clump that was for

him the only stuff of life. He knew there was more to life out there, but he couldn't see it, couldn't see past this big clump.

“MLB, man,” Frankie said. “Let’s see if all this practice out there,” nodding out toward the batting cage in the backyard that was visible from Nate’s father’s den (though it was shrouded in rainfall now), “makes me a better gamer in here.”

“Alrighty,” Nate said, knowing fully well that it didn’t, or wouldn’t—he thought of himself as an exceptional baseball player but he knew from experience that he was terrible at the video game version. He couldn’t understand why. He thought it might be for the same reason that he didn’t like going to baseball games to watch them—he couldn’t sit in a stadium without his stomach hurting him. What he told himself was that he got physically sick watching a game he couldn’t physically play in. So a video game fell under the same category for him. Really, the only reason he played these video games was because Coach Rodrigues said it could help his hand-eye coordination. And Nate would have believed Coach Rodrigues if he told him that eating celery stalks would make him grow facial hair (therefore more intimidating to opposing players).

“Who are you gonna play as?” Frankie asked. “Your dad’s old team?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Nate said. “You can be them, though.” His father’s old team was actually the current team in the game—it was a version of the game that was several years old at that point (Nate found it at the dollar store, after Coach let him in on that little secret about gaming and reaction time).

“Sounds good,” Frankie said. “Hometown team, after all. Hometown pride.” Nate didn’t know what all the hometown pride was about in his town, which was one of the

three or four biggest in the state, though that wasn't saying much in a state that had a population that was outnumbered by quite a few cities in other states on their own. Maybe it was that the baseball team in their town was one of the few attractions the town could take pride in. There was a pretty good art museum, though Nate had only been there when he was forced to, on class fieldtrips and when his stepmother dragged him and his father to see some new exhibit she'd been trying to sell them on for weeks—"Just let her have this one, let's do that for her," Nate's father had told him, creating one of the few moments between Nate and his father when Nate felt like they were in on something together. When they were together it was hard to shake the feeling that, in some way, Nate would be the thing his father left behind in the world—for all Nate's father's success in baseball, that success would be quickly forgotten by the public once he faded from its eye—and so Nate's father spoke to Nate as if he were speaking to himself, a younger version of himself, commanding Nate in ways he might have commanded himself, as if by guiding Nate around the obstacles that had tripped him up in his youth, he could somehow travel back in time and avoid them. Nate saw through this. He believed in his father's advice to him as much as he believed in the possibility of time travel machines.

"Alright," Nate said, and picked a team at random, or picked a team because their stadium used to have an incline ramp in the warning track in center field, which seemed so impractical to Nate, seemed to possess value only in its novelty, until he was watching a game on TV that was being played there and saw a centerfielder scale the ramp and, when he reached the top of it, jump up and reach his glove over the wall to prevent the

batted ball from sailing over the fence for a homerun that would have won the game. He pictured himself doing the same thing, a hundred times over in his head. Why couldn't that be him? He knew he had as much of a chance of playing center field at that stadium one day as he had of winning the lottery (even if his father had once patrolled that same field as a player) but that didn't stop his stepmother from buying lottery tickets, the terrible odds of success she faced with every purchase, so why should the odds stop him?

Frankie played as the away team, since, after all, he said, he was the visitor in Nate's house. Sure enough, there was Nate's father, the digital version of him, stepping into the batter's box to start the game. What was it that unnerved him about seeing even the pixelated version of his father appear on the screen in front of him? (Maybe the pixelated version of his father was even more unnerving than the real one, since the boys found him in a place - the video game realm - where they might have gone for the purpose of escaping him.) In some small way you became the character, or in this case the athlete, on the screen that you were controlling; in no small way did this scare Nate, that one of the two of them was turning into his father, even in the smallest way.

Whenever his father invited him to go to the stadium with him, he would introduce Nate to his teammates saying "the apple didn't fall far from the tree now did it?" And of course his teammates would agree with him, the ones with kids of their own saying yeah it's the same way with mine I tell you what. Nate used to like apples, they used to be his favorite snack, but now he couldn't even look at one without being reminded of the resemblance he bore to his father, which never failed to ruin his appetite.

“Hey, Frankie, let’s grab a snack before we play,” Nate said. He knew that going to the kitchen for a snack would put him at risk of having to interact with his stepmother, perhaps have to listen to her tell him about the damn rain and how awful it was that she couldn’t make to her afternoon zumba class, even though she’d been to morning yoga already that day and did half an hour on the stairmaster afterward—she worked out just as much or more than her professional athlete husband. She liked to brag about this, often. It seemed to Nate that she was always in the kitchen, or if she wasn’t, she would swoop in as soon as Nate entered it - perhaps from her home office where she managed social media accounts for a bunch of local restaurants, or, when the weather was better, she might come in from the patio where she sat during her self-appointed breaks to read teachings of the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh or some other mindfulness guru - and she would insist on making something for Nate, which he hated. For once he just wanted to make something for his own damn self, thank you very much. He didn’t say this, of course, he knew she was just trying to be nice, to fulfill her role (self-appointed) of mother figure for Nate, whose birth mother now lived in the Northeast, where baseball could only be played a few months out of the year—seven years of marriage to Nate’s father was enough to make her never want to lay eyes on a baseball diamond again. Nate spoke with her on the phone every week and spent every other Christmas with her and her new husband and their son, Nate’s stepbrother who he found it hard to believe was related by blood to him because he had no interest in baseball and seemed to know everything about trains, even at age six. Nate, when he was six, was already playing baseball every month of the year except December and January; even so, this year was

the first year he wouldn't be able to spend a few weeks of the summer visiting his mother—typically his summer season ended a few weeks before school started, and he would spend those weeks with his mother, but this year the team he was playing for was playing a longer schedule, so he'd be playing all the way up until the day before classes started up again. He had thought about asking her to come down and visit him, in light of his new schedule, but she hadn't visited in six years, for her high school reunion. If he asked, she would remind him that it was baseball season, that his father wouldn't want her coming down there and interrupting Nate's focus on the task at hand—to which Nate would reply, yeah, sure, but when wasn't it baseball season?

“Sounds good to me,” said Frankie, who was the kind of kid who was always hungry, who could eat anything and any amount of it and not gain an ounce. He was, also, the sort of kid who didn't get to eat any of the kinds of foods he liked at home - his mother didn't let him eat any brand of cereal besides Cheerios, and only the regular kind - so when he was away from home, he tried to take advantage of every opportunity to eat the foods all of his friends seemed to get to enjoy on a regular basis. As for Nate, his stepmother pretty much controlled every food decision he made in the house—everything was procured from the local health food store, and Nate, begrudgingly, liked a lot of it. He thought it wouldn't kill them to have a cheeseburger from Wendy's every once in a while, but his stepmother's response to that was why would you eat a gross fast food burger when you can have a burger that tells you such things about the cow as, what kind of grass it ate, or what nickname its former owner used to refer to him or her with affection. As for snacks—dried fruit, almonds (unsalted and unroasted), and 'protein



balls' became staples in the Piscatelli household, and as a result, staples in the equipment bag Nate took with him to practices and games. Nate's stepmother, who went to almost all of Nate's games, was the type of fan who was not at all afraid of being vocal—toward the umpires, fans of the opposing team, Nate's coach, and particularly Nate. Not at all afraid of reminding him to eat his fruit and nuts in the fourth or fifth inning to get his energy back up. These reminders never failed to embarrass Nate. It was, he had admitted to a teammate on more than one occasion, better than having his father shout at him from the stands—well, his father didn't shout, but rather he came down from the stands and would hiss at Nate from behind the dugout, reminding him of the various mechanical adjustments in Nate's swing that they discussed when they did practice together.

Sometimes Nate wished he could play with his headphones on, tuning out that sort of interference. Baseball wasn't particularly dependent on your hearing anyway, like basketball was, or football, where success was so dependent on communication with your teammate before, during, and after the plays. The before and the after were important in baseball too, but the during was all about locking in, communicating with nobody but yourself. The baseball field was one of the few places where talking to yourself was socially acceptable. Sometimes you saw a pitcher shouting at himself between pitches, trying to pump himself up. Sure, it scared his teammates, but it pumped him up, so it was worth it. So much of baseball, or at least the baseball Nate knew, wasn't socially acceptable anyway—practicing on the weekends when his classmates were hanging out, playing in the summers when they were working as lifeguards and golf shop attendants and grocery baggers. It wasn't that he didn't like what he was doing—he loved it—but it

felt odd to be on his own while doing it. As much as Frankie struggled with baseball, Nate thought his friend understood this about the game, that it was a team sport but one that was so highly dependent on the individual at any given moment in the game. Nate thought he recognized the streak of independence in Frankie that he felt he had in himself. Maybe it came from having fathers that everyone in town knew (though they knew the two men for much different reasons). Each had a sense of being known for something, thought it was something they hadn't chosen, and they each had a desire to be known for something they'd chosen.

The two boys went into the kitchen. The first thing they heard was the sound of a dog barking. It was a television dog barking, though—a commercial for home security systems. In the first sequence the dog barks, the burglars enter and take things from the house anyway. In the second sequence, no dog, the burglars enter, the alarm goes off, they take things, but on the way to the getaway car they're met by police, who were informed of these burglars by the home security system. Nate sighed. Home protection wasn't going to be the best argument for him if he wanted to argue for getting a dog. Then they heard the sound of Nate's stepmother's voice.

“You boys hungry?” she almost exclaimed. She had a grin on her face that went, or could have gone, up toward the ceiling, it had that much force behind it. Her teeth were whiter than game-ready baseballs, freshly polished, untarnished pearls. She also wore a pearl necklace, she was not found without a pearl necklace unless she was exercising. She had been reading a library copy of *The Canterbury Tales*—she was enrolled in a summer course in early English lit, fulfilling a requirement for her to

complete her bachelor's in nutrition, which she had put on hold five years earlier when she met Nathan Senior. Now she was twenty-six, twice Nate's age. Nathan Senior was three times Nate's age. The age difference between each member of the family stopped just short of being a bit outlandish. Or at least that's how the people in town viewed it; for Nate it was just plain weird having a stepmother who was two decades younger than his real mother—his real mother was several years older than his father, she was one of his professors in college, his junior year (he signed his first pro contract after that year and, having no reason to ever finish his degree after that point, never went back to school). Nathan Senior thought it was good that his wife was finishing up her schooling, as he called it. He admired her commitment, he said, especially as a person who, he admitted, wouldn't have made it through college - or might not have even even started college - without baseball getting him a scholarship to one. Doubtless this philosophy shaped Nate's view of, or idea - abstract as it was at that point - about what college was, and what he wanted from it—he wanted not only to get into a better school than his father but finish the degree and get drafted into pro ball afterward. The possibility of failure on any of these fronts didn't scare Nate because he didn't fathom the possibility of failure. No, it was as foreign to him as a decent snack was to Frankie, whose own mother was like the DEA but instead of narcotics she combated corn syrup and sweet treats of any kind.

“Yes we are!” Frankie said, placing emphasis on each word. The boys returned to the den with their snack of lettuce wraps filled with free-range ground chicken sautéed in herbs de Provence and Californian olive oil, devoured the snack in as much time as it

took Nate's stepmother to simply remove these ingredients from the refrigerator, placed the plate that had held the snack on Nate's father's desk - a desk that really should only be referred to as a table, as the word desk implies work activities occurring on the surface with some level of regularity - and commenced the game, which Frankie won easily, as the video game version of Nate's father won game Most Valuable Player honors with six hits, six runs batted in, and a single-game record eight stolen bases. If Nate had been furious at the loss, he did a good job of hiding it; in fact, it was one of the few losses Nate had been handed in his life after which he wasn't all that bummed. Maybe it was because he set his expectations low with video games because of his poor track record in the field. Maybe it was because he demonstrated superiority over Frankie in the batting cage on an almost-daily basis that summer and it actually felt somewhat refreshing to hand the kid the victory for once. Maybe, on some level, he was proud of his digital dad—proud of even having a digital dad, and proud of having one that could hit the baseball the way he did, and steal bases more often than Frankie had been pocketing gluten-free chocolate chip cookies that summer when they took their breaks from the heat and their outdoor drills. Of course Nate had noticed him, but didn't mention it because he had sympathy for the kid, he'd be fiending for sweets too if he had to live in a house with Frankie's parents, who probably would have grounded him if they found his cookie stash. Sometimes throughout that summer Nate found himself wondering how his life might be different if he had Frankie's parents instead of his own. For one, his parents would be in the same place. They would also be in the same time—Frankie's parents were older than Nate's but at least they were about the same age. Nate's father might have said age was only a

number, which wasn't entirely false, but age was what forced him to stop playing the game he loved—surely if age were only a number Nate's father would have gone on playing the game till he croaked. Frankie said his father told him it was better to have older parents, that older parents had more wisdom to offer. Maybe that was true. At the very least Nate thought Frankie's parents would have more wisdom to offer than his stepmother did, even if they were lunatics about what Frankie got to bring as a snack to school or a practice or a game. After they finished playing video games and Frankie said his mother was on her way over to pick him up, Nate took the empty plates back into the kitchen, where his stepmother had returned to her reading, the TV still on in the background.

“Doesn't that bother you?” Nate asked her. “Having the TV on while you're trying to read?” He put the dishes in the sink, thought about leaving them since they weren't all that dirty, but thought again and washed them off, then placed them in the dishwasher.

“Not really,” she said, though she had looked up from her book and she was smiling at him. “Actually I think it helps me focus. Something about trying to tune out a distraction helps me focus more on what's in front of me. Maybe that's BS though. I mean, bologna, or something.” She covered her mouth with her hand, as if she'd said something truly awful, but then she laughed at herself.

“Sheesh, Adrienne, I know what 'BS' means,” Nate said. “I'm twelve years old.” He emphasized the word twelve as if it carried a hefty weight.

“I know you do,” she replied. “I don’t mean to baby you. Even though my baby brother is older than you...” Clearly she was messing with him.

“How can he be a baby if he’s fourteen?” Nate shot back. “He’ll be in high school this fall for chrissakes.”

“He’ll always be my baby brother,” she said. “That’s just how that goes.”

“Well,” he said. “I doubt very much he likes that.”

“Oh, so you’re saying you don’t baby your stepbrother?” she asked him. “I’ve seen how you talk to him.”

“Kevin is six!” Nate said. “Totally different situation.” Besides, he thought, Kevin isn’t even my real brother. Just like you aren’t my real mother, you could practically be my sister—he wanted to say this but didn’t.

“Fair enough,” she said. “Still hungry?”

“Not really,” Nate said. He was still hungry - lettuce wraps don’t exactly fill all of the crevasses - but didn’t want to let her think of some other healthy concoction that he’d probably enjoy but would leave him hungry again in another hour. It was no surprise that Adrienne looked like an athlete, even though she would admit (rather proudly) that she had never played an organized sport. She was very careful about what she ate and it seemed she was working out almost constantly. She had met Nate’s father in an exercise class several winters earlier—it was a “power yoga” class, a mixture of pilates and yoga, recommended to Nathan Senior by one of his younger teammates. She had pretended to recognize Nate’s father from TV, though she hadn’t, she only noticed he was wearing

exercise clothes with his team's logo, and made a lucky guess—this was a secret from Nathan Senior, though she had let Nate in on it.

After Frankie left, Nate agreed to watch a movie with Adrienne—she had complained that he never did anything with her, and he couldn't argue with that, since it was the truth, and truthfully he felt a little bad for Adrienne being married to someone who was hardly ever at home, even if he didn't mind that his father was gone so often. He knew that his father was the kind of father who gave what he could to Nate, his son, which was saying something, but if you stripped away all the things money could buy, if you took away the talent for baseball handed down to him - whether Nate liked it or not, he had inherited much of his talent for the game from his father, and no matter how far he made it in his baseball career, his career would always be compared to his father's - then Nate wondered what was left there that his father had or could have given him. It was hard for Nate to imagine what he had never known—he thought, yes, Frankie's parents were weird as hell for making him eat Grape Nuts for breakfast instead of Frosted Flakes, but he thought it said something about them as parents, that they cared that much about what Frankie ate. He knew that if his father re-married with someone besides Adrienne, someone who didn't obsess over making healthy choices in food, he'd probably be allowed to eat whatever he wanted. Which was awesome, yes, but still, he didn't know what that really said about his father, that his father would've let him eat whatever he wanted. If there was one tangible thing Nate could have wished for in addition to what he'd been given by his father, it would have been his father's right arm. No, not his actual arm, but the combination of strength and power and quickness in the muscle fibers of that

particular region of his body, Nate wanted that. As good as Nate was at hitting - and while much of his talent was genetic, he practiced hitting more than anyone his age, and could take some pride in making himself as good of a hitter as he was - his arm was lacking. His father once threw a runner out at home from the outfield wall; Nate couldn't even throw the ball from the outfield wall so it would roll to home plate, he'd tried on multiple occasions and couldn't ever get past the pitcher's mound. He knew that he was still young, that as his body matured his throwing arm would as well. But he wanted the same recognition for his throwing arm as he was already getting for his bat—he had already heard coaches say on multiple occasions that he was “damn near as good as his dad already.” They thought “a few more years and he'll be out-hitting the old man.” Nate knew that there were a lot of big league players who could hit as well as his father did, but there was almost nobody else who could throw the ball from the outfield the way he did. It was his arm that kept him in the majors for so long. Nate knew that if he did make it to the majors - and he truly believed he would - he would need some distinguishing factor that would keep him there. It was what got him out of bed nearly every morning to run wind sprints in the backyard. He'd strap on the parachute - for the wind resistance - and run the sixty-yard dash—his goal was to run ten of them and have the time on the tenth be no greater than the time on the first. He knew that someday college scouts would be looking at his sixty-yard dash time just as closely as they would look at his height, his weight, his throwing speed, batting average, GPA, SAT, etc. He was already down to a seven-second average. He didn't think anyone on his team could break the eight-second mark; hell, half of them couldn't even finish sixty yards without slowing down to catch



their breath. He knew that he probably wouldn't always be the fastest player on his team, but for the time being, it was something he could take pride in.

He made it to the end of the movie, but he hadn't really been following along with it, mostly daydreaming about baseball and how he'd play that weekend, if the weather cleared off enough for the tournament to be played. He visualized a lot. Not just the good scenarios - hitting homeruns, making diving catches in the outfield, stealing second base and then third two pitches later - but the bad ones, too—striking out on a bad call by the ump and practicing reacting in a less negative way, for example. The credits rolled and he looked over at Adrienne and noticed she had fallen asleep. He took the blanket from where it was resting on his chair and spread it out over her where she was laying on the couch. It was only 9:30 but he decided he would go upstairs and go to sleep. He didn't know if the games the following day would be canceled or not, but he wanted to be well rested in case they did end up playing. He wouldn't go to sleep, though, without some evening practice first—100 reps of tossing the ball up toward the ceiling from his bed with only the flick of his wrist, practicing ball control, seeing how close he could get the ball to the ceiling without touching it (somehow no one else had noticed the abrasions on the ceiling left behind by the ball). Before Nate could do that, though, he noticed Adrienne's phone light up on the coffee table in front of the sofa where she slept—it was his father, or, in her phone, “Husbie” with two red hearts also included in the contact name, and a picture of him lighting up the background, one Nate recognized from his birthday party the year before, for which Nate's father had rented out one of the upper level suites at his team's stadium. The team he coached for was a minor league team so

the stadium was nowhere near as nice as the one where he had played - Nate knew this firsthand, having spent plenty of time at the major league park - but still it was a pretty cool venue for a twelve-year-old's birthday party. Nate and his father were posing in the picture with one arm wrapped around the other's shoulder—Nate was already nearly as tall as his father, though that said more about how short his father was, a player who always looked too small for his jersey, which meant he could always surprise an opposing team by hitting the ball over their heads and to the wall. Nate thought his father was probably checking to see if he was in bed yet, since it was the night before a game—this made Nate hesitate a bit before answering the phone, but he answered it nonetheless.

“Hello?” Nate said, a bit hesitantly.

Nate heard nothing except for three knocks on a door in the background, and he wasn't actually sure at first if the sound was coming from the phone or from somewhere in the house.

“Nate?” he heard his father say. “You there?”

“Yes, Dad, I'm here,” Nate said impatiently. Of course he was there. Nate was the one who should have been asking that.

“Where's Adrienne?” he asked.

“Asleep,” Nate said.

“Alright,” Nathan Senior said. “Will you wake her up for me?”

“She's fast asleep, Dad, right here on the couch. Can't you just tell me what you want to tell her?” It felt weird to Nate going against his father's wishes, whatever they were. Felt kind of good, though, too.

There was silence again, for a few seconds. “Got some news for us, Nate. Wish you’d go ahead and do as I said, and wake her up.”

Even the slightest hint of sternness in his father’s voice was enough to turn Nate back into line. “Adrienne?” Nate said in a loud whisper away from the phone, and reached down to give her shoulder a gentle shake. When she didn’t wake up, he shook her shoulder again, a bit more firmly this time. Still sound asleep. In fact, she started to snore softly.

“You hear that?” Nate asked his father. “She’s out. Just tell me the news, Dad.”

Nate’s father huffed, as if to say that if he were there he would have had no trouble waking her up. “Alright,” he said, and Nate detected hoarseness in his father’s voice. Must’ve been yelling at someone earlier. “I just got word from the front office. Gonna be moving back home, Nate. Hitting coach with the big league club got fired and they want me to replace him. This is big for me, Nate, big for us, too. I’m finally back in the show.”

“That’s awesome, Dad,” Nate said, though his words sounded hollow to him—he wasn’t thinking about how awesome the promotion was for his father, but rather how his own life would change with his father moving back in during the season and being around the house a whole lot more. “When do you start?”

“Right away. Tomorrow. I’m flying back home tonight. Got a home series starting tomorrow.”

Nate thought again not of his father’s first game as a big league hitting coach but his own game in tomorrow’s tournament, which he figured was likely to be canceled—

the rain still hadn't let up entirely. The big league team's field, on the other hand, was likely to have been covered with a tarp all that day, and Nate knew from the forecast that it wasn't supposed to rain much the next day. There was still no official update on his game, though—a few minutes before the call from his father Nate had checked his messages on his own phone for something from his coach, who would send out texts to them when he heard about a cancellation. He was thinking less about the game now than about the chances his father would try to attend it—Nate's game was at noon, Nathan Senior's game was at 7 in the evening, so theoretically Nate's father could attend both if he really wanted to. Nate had gotten used to his father not being there, had grown comfortable with his absence.

“You there, Nate? What do you think of that? How ‘bout that, huh? Your old man is back in the show!” Nate heard the sound of a woman's voice—“sir, you need to hang up the phone now, sir”—and then his father's voice again: “Well thank god I'll be flying private from now on. Damn flight attendants, won't let me talk to my own son.” This sounded to Nate like an attempt at a quip directed at whoever was sitting next to him. “Listen, buddy, I gotta go now, I'll be seeing you soon though. No need to wait up for me, I know you've got a game of your own tomorrow.”

Nate couldn't believe how quickly the next three hours passed. Stared up at the ceiling for what seemed like a whole night, wondering if sleep was ever going to come to him. Eventually he was awakened by the sound of his father emerging through the front door, though he wasn't sure if he'd ever fallen asleep at all. He heard his father move into the kitchen, then the living room, then the sound of Adrienne screaming with

joy—surely she was surprised by his presence at first, which might've explained why she reacted so excitedly to the news. It was certain, though, that Adrienne was the most joyful in her reaction to this news, among the three of them. If there was something Nate and his father had in common it was that they rarely showed emotion, positive or negative.

Then as he listened to his father's footsteps leading up the steps and, presumably, to Nate's room, Nate thought about what he would say to his father. Or maybe he'd pretend to be asleep. Certainly he wouldn't say how he felt, which was that he was fine with things just the way they were, or as they had been, with his father out on the road most of the time. When his father wasn't around, people were less likely to look at Nate as Nathan Junior, the son of an all-star; when his father was around, Nate got stuck firmly in his father's shadow. How many other kids would've said they'd gladly live in that shadow if it meant they could have a former all-star for a father? Nate figured they were many, but knew that none of them understood the reality of the situation, that he'd always have to fight to get his achievements viewed as his own instead of under the afterglow of his father's accomplishments.

The door to his room clicked open.

"Nate?" he heard his father say. "You awake?"

Nate didn't move, pretended like he was asleep.

"You up, son?"

"Does it look like I'm up?" Nate replied.

"What's with the sass? Damn, I just thought you'd wanna pay respects to MLB's newest hitting guru."

Seeing that he was outed, that fake sleep was no longer a façade he could hold up to his father, he arose and walked over to his father and gave him a hug, buried his face in the bend of his father's huge arm. His arms were about the same size, it wasn't like tennis where players' racquet-side arms would swell up much bigger than the opposite arm, but his throwing arm was definitely stronger than the other, or at least felt that way, with all those little sinews of muscle buried deep within, the ones that can only be built from whipping one's shoulder joint around at maximum speed to throw a ball as fast as possible to a target thousands of times over.

"What do you think about it, Nate?" his father asked him. "Your dad back on top, huh? How about that?"

"I mean, you're just the hitting coach, not the manager..." Nate half-mumbled.

"What's that?" his father asked. "What'd I hear?"

"Nothing."

"Bullshit," his father said, and grabbed Nate by his shoulders and extended him out arms-length in front of him. "I know what you said I just wanna hear you say it again."

"I mean, it's true," Nate said a little louder this time.

"How are you gonna come at me with this sass, today of all days?" his father snarled at him. Nate caught a whiff of what he thought was mouthwash at first, coming out of his father's mouth, but then he remembered that the few times he'd ridden on an airplane with his father his father had ordered a drink that wasn't complimentary each time. He tossed Nate aside and turned toward the door; Nate stumbled back but caught

himself on his bedframe, spat a “fuck you, old man” back at his father before he twisted the door open again.

Before Nate could even think of defending himself he was face-down in the carpet, wrists bound behind his back by his father’s hands that were like locking pliers.

“Don’t you ever speak to me that way,” Nate’s father hissed into his ear, though to Nate it was more like a shout in how his words filled the space of his head entirely. Nate knew he was in the wrong, talking to his father like he might smack talk an opposing player out of earshot of the umpire. Why was he mouthing off like this? He couldn’t think, his mind had been in a whirl ever since he decided to pick up the phone earlier. He thought that maybe if he never picked up the phone earlier then none of this would be happening. He was still the age when you think you can wish something away just with the force of your own mind.

His father held him down there on the carpet until he agreed to apologize, and he did, albeit half-heartedly. Nate wondered where his stepmother had been in all this, he wondered if she would have stepped in and defended him. He thought he could hear her breathing just outside the door but when his father released the grip on his wrists and backed off of him and retreated to the door and swung it open, no one was there.

“You better be ready to play tomorrow,” his father said before leaving, and Nate started praying for more rain, so he wouldn’t have to ride with his father to the game the next day. Earlier in the day he had thought there was no chance he would have to play the next day but now it was near midnight and there was still no message from his coach that the game was canceled; of course, he hadn’t been dreading playing the game earlier in the

day, but now that his father was going to be involved he couldn't think of anything he wanted to do less. He checked his phone again for a message, but there was none. He checked the weather forecast on his phone and saw that the chance of rain had been reduced to thirty percent the rest of the night, which meant that if the game wasn't canceled by now there wasn't much that was going to change its status now. If for nothing else Nate wanted the game canceled so he would have some time to think about what just happened in his life, what the re-established presence of his father was going to mean for his own life. He got up from the carpet and went into his bathroom and stared at himself in the face, the skin around his right temple reddened after being rubbed into the carpet. He felt like he was looking at his only ally. Who else could understand, or would even try to understand, the struggles of the kid with the baseball all-star for a father? Sounded pretty awesome to everyone else, didn't it? Who could he tell, in this town where everyone still worshipped his father, these things about who their hero really was? Looking at that mirror he was at least thankful to be able to remind himself that he bore much more of a resemblance to his mother than his father, wearing her slightly elevated cheekbones and slightly upturned nose. He decided he would call his mother the next day, before his game. Could he move in with her? He thought he would miss Adrienne a bit but certainly not so much that he couldn't get over it. He knew that in two years he would have a spot on the varsity team at the high school nearby, the coach had already told him so. That was the main obstacle in his mind between him and moving in with his mother. He knew he could probably make a lot of other varsity teams as a freshman, could probably make one near his mother, but it was so damn cold up there, they only



played baseball a few months out of the year up there (which was, she often reminded him when they spoke on the phone, a big reason why she moved there). Wasn't realistic to think he could escape there.

He went and lay back down in bed, noticed his shoulders were still tense from the run-in with his father. He stared up at the scuffmarks on the ceiling from the baseball he tossed up to it nightly, a small evidence of a small part of the work he did to get to this point in this life as a ballplayer that was still in its novice phase, and he was both invigorated and terrified at all the work that lay ahead of him.

## **Brush Creek**

It was late in the evening on a Sunday in the summer and you were out on a walk with your mother and your dog, Reggie. You're not sure what it was exactly that qualified Reggie as "your" dog, as the amount of responsibility taken by you and your father to care for the dog on a daily basis was next to zero; your mother, on the other hand, refused to make any plans without first addressing Reggie's needs. He was the type of dog who never appears to be satisfied: if your mother happened to be in the kitchen when he'd just finished a bowl of food, he would plop himself down in front of her and stare into her soul, demanding that she pity him, the poor and helpless mutt. Nighttime exercise with Reg was a pleasant departure from the afternoon boil. Regardless of time of day, however, a summertime stroll there didn't occur without a cicada accompaniment and a lather of perspiration that was always more abundant than you anticipated.

You and the dog struggled to keep up with your mother, her baby-blue Sauconys seeming to float along the pavement, their plastic outer shells gleaming under each street lamp about as brightly as the stars above the three of you, the light from above obscured only by the massive oak trees that flanked the road from both sides.

"If you were moving any faster," you huffed at your mother, whose pace had left you and Reggie at least ten feet behind her, "I'd say you'd be ready for the Olympic trials in power-walking."

You could tell Reggie was pissed, as he'd gotten used to these walks being his time: if there was a fallen leaf he deemed worth inspecting for the better part of a minute, well, it would have been rude not to oblige him.

"But you're still too slow," you continued, hoping a little reverse psychology would work in the collective favor of you and Reg. "Even for the senior division."

"You know, you're actually lucky you have older parents," she replied, finally slowing her pace a bit. "You should be picking our brains and extracting kernels of wisdom at every opportunity."

And she sped up again, her arms slicing through the thick air. She had been waiting for you and the dog at the bottom of the hill for "over a minute" when you caught up. You told her she wouldn't have had to wait if she hadn't propelled herself down the hill faster than she would have made it on an electric scooter. She was staring down into the creek beside the street when you walked up next to her. A thick branch had fallen from a pine tree into the creek, apparently struck down during a storm the night before.

Your mother asked, "Did you know that trees can talk to each other? I read about it in the paper today."

"Well, no, madame," you said. "Can't say that I've ever heard such a claim."

"Well, you might as well believe it, 'cause it's true."

Some people deliver their words a manner so entirely void of self-doubt that you begin to wonder if they ever have even the slightest notion that they could be wrong. Your mother was one of those people. She used to tell you that's what thirty-plus years as a journalist does to a person, a number that was actually on the low side for her, since it

didn't account for her roles as editor-in-chief of her high school and college newspapers. Your father must have given up trying to win arguments very early on; he often wondered aloud how she didn't end up an attorney, though he never wondered for long, because she would quickly but calmly inform him that a lawyer's job is to win a case, facts or no facts.

"Some things you just can't argue with," she said, "and science is one of 'em."

This was a sentiment that you'd heard from her more than once before; generally you wouldn't take issue with it, but the hallmark of science is hard evidence, and up to that point in the conversation you hadn't heard any.

"So how exactly do they go about communicating?" you asked. "Is the rustling of leaves just the trees whispering sweet nothings to each other? Do they drink a little too much water at night and start clapping each other on the trunks with their branches?"

You had no doubt that she would be able to produce an informative, intelligent explanation - she didn't introduce a subject to a conversation without first knowing she could elucidate it fully - but you weren't going to pass up this opportunity to rib her for her wealth of random knowledge.

"Well, I don't want to bore you," she said, "so I'll give you a quick summary."

You breathed an exaggerated sigh of relief.

"First of all," she said, "everything that we can see above the surface - bark, branch networks, leaves - none of that facilitates the connections they have with each other. It all happens underground." She bent down to feel the twig-laden grass with her hands, a gesture that Reggie took as a "come here" command, his obedience quickly

rewarded with one of the dog biscuits that seemed ever-present in her pocket. “On one level or another, all their roots are connected down there. The example in the paper was of a 300-year-old tree stump identified as showing signs of life. Tree scientists said the only explanation was that the stump was receiving nutrients from nearby trees through their network of roots.”

The fact that there were such individuals as tree scientists was for you an amusing discovery. You imagined these people growing up in places where the main attractions were trees; shrouded by armies of oaks and maples, perhaps they found little else to do besides immerse themselves in all the details of their surroundings, becoming amateur tree experts, starting environmental clubs in their high schools, eventually blogging about arboretums on their college campuses, and later crafting dissertations on deforestation.

She continued, “There’s something a little bit romantic about that, isn’t there?”

You waited for her to elaborate.

“I mean, if you’re a tree, you can’t just pack up and leave when your family starts driving you crazy, you know?”

At this you both had a good laugh, as this is precisely what each of you had done, flying the coop for your college years, she to Texas and you to Florida.

“Nope,” she said. “You’re in it for the long haul. And if that 300-year-old stump is anything like some of the old people I know, you have to imagine its family had their patience tested more than a few times.”

Since her retirement she had been volunteering at a nursing home once a week, though you knew this wasn’t a reference to any member of her painting group, but rather

your grandfather, who in his late eighties was still living on his own, despite his debilitating back pain that made such a living situation impractical. Her ongoing crusade to convince him of the benefits of assisted living had been a bit of a touchy subject around the house lately. Various clashes between you and your own father came to mind. Looking back on your mini-feuds, most of which concerned your state of employment, your father was not entirely off base in wondering how over a decade of private school could lead to nothing more than part-time jobs at an alternative newspaper and a restaurant. Fortunately, no matter how much you two argue, it seems you can always fix things up, at least temporarily, by watching a baseball game together or going out for a bike ride on the trails that sweep along the banks of the Missouri. With your mother and her father, it seemed they were incapable of reconciling after an argument that spiraled out of control. You were admittedly curious about the inner workings of this conflict, though you'd made a decision not to pry on that particular night, as you'd been having a peaceful rendezvous, even with the cicadas raging on and the summer heat sautéing your brains.

“I hope your father and I aren't driving you too crazy, hon,” she said. “Are we?”

“What? No way. Not at all.” Was she somehow implying that you were already crazy enough?

“Good,” she said. “I'm thankful for that.”

“There's something I have to tell you, though,” she continued. “I certainly don't want to. But I need to.”

Somehow the song of the cicadas grew louder, if only for that moment.

“I’m sick, Vince.” Her voice suddenly lost nearly all of its usual punch. “I have been for a little while.”

The sound of your own name coming from her almost always meant something serious; in this moment it was the sound of your name that rattled around in your head before you even began to process the rest of it. The two of you were so close that her calling you by name - and even you calling her “Mom” - felt vaguely formal.

“Fortunately they - the doctors, I mean - caught it in the early stages,” she said. “So we can treat it. We’re still waiting to hear from them if surgery is an option.”

You didn’t know what to say yet - could anyone? - so you just nodded along.

“Either way, it’s going to be different for a while,” she said. “I’m going to be different for a while. I just want you to be ready for that.”

You restrained yourself but wanted to say, How could I be ready? How does anyone prepare for that? But you couldn’t get frustrated with her; she was the one who was sick, after all. The one who would have to suffer the most. You wished she told you sooner, even though it wouldn’t have mattered. It was comforting at first to know it was a treatable form, but eventually that ceased to matter, too. The treatments refused to work, and you could only watch as she withered away from the world.

That was the night loss introduced itself to you. Maybe part of you was stolen by loss and left in the creek that night, thrown in along with the rocks and the fallen branches and the road debris; maybe the sense that you could recover that part of you is what keeps you coming back to this town, long after your mother was suddenly forced to leave it. It was that part of you that used to believe you could become invincible if you

just tried hard enough. But you know better by now. By now you know that you could stare into that dark green water for hours and find nothing other than your reflection, save for maybe the outline of a trout as it cuts its path beneath the surface.