



OLYMPIA PARK & OTHER STORIES

a voiceHOUSE experience

OLYMPIA PARK

My father didn't give me baseball.

We never listened to the snap of worn leather together in the August dusk. We didn't find our seats in the bleachers to shell peanuts. He never told me to choke up, or how to crow hop a throw from deep center. I never asked him to groove one low and away so I could practice going to the opposite field.

At night, back from work, my father would eat at our kitchen table with its four, sharp corners in complete silence. He'd finish his plate, set down his fork and knife, then bark at Mom and I to leave him alone to his study. The old man's study was a forbidden place, full of cigarette smoke and empty beer cans. The door would be nearly closed, but I would stand nearby and listen to the voice of Pat Hughes over the radio. My father would curse, he'd disparage, he'd hold his breath then huff in exasperation.

I remained motionless, quiet as could be, listening.

Crinkled aluminum.

The flick of a lighter.

That ball's got a chance.

Though you wouldn't say my old man give baseball to me, he certainly didn't take it away.

Mom signed me up for Little League and drove me to my first practice. She bought me a glove and a bat but sternly warned me not to lose either as she dropped me off at the curb.

My father joined steel I-beams for a living. In the morning, if he still hadn't left for the job site, while I gathered myself together to leave for school I'd peek at him as he would read through the Sports Page and mutter. He always took the paper with him out the door and I'd never see the headlines again, aside from the one time he didn't, he must have been in a rush or too hungover and he'd left it on the table. I hid the newspaper away to my bedroom and in secret I poured over every word, every picture, every column, every box score. I taught myself what the numbers meant, the rows and the decimal places and the notations. I became aware of the rest of the league, other players. I admired the logos of the other teams. My curiosity was piqued by the great sluggers, home run totals and runs batted in.

In my father's house, there was only one baseball team.

In my father's house, there was only one baseball league.

The team wore royal blue.

The league required pitchers to hit at the plate.

Laying down a clean bunt was more important than legging out a double.

Sound defense was more important than big swings.

I only played one season of Little League before my father died.

He didn't attend any of my games, or ask me any questions about my experience at Olympia Park where Mom would drop me off.

It was an accident on the job, and one night, my father didn't come home.

After he was buried in the ground, I remember a feeling of relief. We departed from All Saints Cemetery, and the next morning, suddenly I had the Sports Page all to myself. I cut out the other teams' logos and arranged them on a small desk in my room which was meant to serve as a place to do homework. I monitored where each team stood in the division, positioning them up or down. I would track wins and losses, pennant races. And I could root for whoever I wanted. Of course I rooted for the Cubs, and preferred the National League, but when the paper arrived each morning in our driveway I could celebrate the accomplishments of the previous day for any team, and any player, I wanted.

I remember a feeling of tension dissipating after we buried the old man.

Though my father's study remained off limits. It continued to smell like cigarettes, despair. I don't recall ever being able to bring myself to walk inside of it.

Sometimes I would linger in front of the closed door.

I would listen for the sound of my father grunting, cursing.

The emptiness of it.

There was relief, but an emptiness too.

Eventually I asked Mom to move the radio to our kitchen, and I began to listen to ball games at the table. I learned about tagging up. I learned about the infield shift. I learned about lefty-righty matchups and double-switches.

In the spring Mom asked me if I wanted to play baseball again, and I told her I did. She continued to sign me up for baseball from then on.

I taught myself how to throw a curve.

I taught myself how to let the ball travel further when I wanted to drive it opposite field, all on my own.

Other boys' fathers shouted at them from the bleachers, "Eye on the ball!"

"Keep your shoulder in there!"

"That was outside!"

No one cheered when I connected for a base hit.

No one cared if I struck out the side.

I watched my teammates dwindle over the years, their love of the game diminishing.

Not me.

I kept playing.

I played baseball and fell in love with baseball and built my identity around baseball. I made myself into a ball player. I could talk pitch sequencing and make a case for a Cy Young candidate. I watched the Cubs lose, I watched the Cubs win.

My father didn't give me baseball.

But in a way, he did.

I played in high school and learned how to spit tobacco juice from between my lips.

I learned how to talk to girls and take them out for pizza after our games.

All on my own.

When I found out Katie was pregnant with a boy, baseball was the first thought on my mind. We were young, too young, and I was naïve about fatherhood, what it might take, what it would require.

Katie wasn't ready to get married, and neither was I.

Either way, I would give my son baseball.

When Ronny was born, I bought him a Cubs hat.

For his first birthday, I wrapped up a tee-ball set and a glove in yesterday's newspaper.

Katie never intended to spend the rest of her life with me, and even though we drifted apart, she supported me being a dad to Ron. She was a good woman. Levelheaded. She understood how complicated things were with my old man. Katie knew what it would mean to me, to be present in Ron's life. She wanted her boy to have a daddy.

"I'll sign him up, I'll fill out the forms and everything," I told her over the phone. "And I'll coach. I'll pick him up, take him to the games. We can spend time together. What do you think?"

Katie agreed.

She thought it would be a good idea.

She figured if I could give one thing to my son, it would be baseball.

I helped coach Ron's tee-ball team at Olympia Park. Then, I helped coach Little League. I showed Ron where the knob of his bat should be pointing during his swing load. I offered him tips on how to read a fly ball when the sun was glaring. I instructed him how to gather up a grounder, to rotate then separate.

"Ronny, keep your shoulder in there! The ball isn't going to kill you!"

My son was almost eight years old and I was standing in the dugout, one of several coaches for our team, barking at their boy.

I stopped and listened to the other coaches.

We were all yelling at our sons, what they were doing wrong, what they needed to do right.

Ruining the game for them.

I asked Ron, later that afternoon, driving him back to Katie's mom's apartment, what he thought of the game I loved.

My son didn't respond.

He was silent.

I felt a pit in my stomach at the red light and looked at a frustrated boy in the rearview mirror.

I had meant to give him baseball.

It was the only thing I could offer him, back then.

PUT OUT

By then Dad was a middle-aged man, nearly an old man, pot-bellied and drunk on Memorial Day with his worn work boots clomping across the middle of a busy city street, in a stagger, staggering drunk, he wouldn't consider to cross at the light, at the intersection with the signal between the lines with the other pedestrians, no, by then he was a pot-bellied drunk who staggered and waved on a few cars before he zigzagged from the south end to the north end of the street, at the corner was the Package Store where Dad bought his smokes and his twelve-pack of beer, it was three o'clock in the afternoon on Monday and Dad had spent the holiday gulping at cans of beer, he had been off work, a painter, drunk and in a stagger down the block for more to drink, for another pack of smokes, the rain had quit and his worn work boots splashed in the puddles like echoes of applause, marred leather scuffed with rips and tears where you could make out the steel toe from the tan finish on the boots, splotches of paint, his eyes blinked red because after he woke up that morning, with the day off work, he cracked open a can of beer instead of cooking up a breakfast for himself, he was drunk and wore a white t-shirt which clung to his body

and made his pot-belly appear larger than it actually was, he had fixed a ballcap tight against his forehead so it left a mark when he pulled it off, his eyes were bloodshot as he carried a brown bag under his arm, down an alleyway, back to his one bedroom apartment with the pizza boxes in the corner of the living room, the thin couch cushions, the dishes piled up in the kitchen sink, back to the ballgame on the television, back for a few more cold beers on the couch before he fell asleep, passed out, a mark on his forehead from his ballcap, before another workday, before another hangover, before another pit of disappointment in front of his bathroom mirror, with the rainwater puddles splashing underfoot, I watched my dad, a middle-aged man drunk with his potbelly, a brown paper bag under his arm, I watched him from the fire escape of a six-story apartment building, the stairs on the back of the building where I had been waiting for him, I showed up unannounced and went up the stairs in the back to knock on the door of his apartment and since nobody answered I figured Dad might have gone out for a drink or a smoke and something caught my eye so I turned and I saw a figure staggering up the alleyway towards his building, towards the back stairwell, puddles splashed under his work boots, I felt a lump in my throat, standing there, waiting, his apartment building had a small yard behind it where a few trashcans and a charcoal grill loitered, a small yard and then a small garage connected to the alley, and the echoes were rainwater puddles and my dad's boots and I remember looking down at him as if he were a stray dog, a dog lost and forgotten by its former owner, a lifetime lost and passed him by, a cool gust of wind in the breezeways between adjacent buildings, running alongside the bricks, by then it had been so long, he would never say it but I could tell, by the way he fixed his red eyes in front of him, I could tell as he labored past the yard towards the wooden stairs with the cold beer cans in the brown paper bag under his arms, I could tell as the rainwater splashed and the cars drove by, you could hear the cars from the across the alley behind the other buildings, the main intersection a few streets over, you could hear the traffic, I could tell as I watched my dad a sadness ached like something horrible inside of him and had been aching for years and years, it was why he drank the way he did, why he lived the way he did, he had lost the best parts of himself and now had to find a way to keep beating on down the line knowing it would never be like it had once been, with his hands on a clipboard announcing the batting order, in the dugout chewing gum, relaying signs to the catcher or the first base coach, I remember my dad in his prime, the coach of a high school

ball team, with marbled, blue eyes, he was full of excitement and passion because he knew how to play the game and how to teach the game and how to win the game, he loved baseball, he would let me watch his boys work through their batting practice routines and he'd put me on his shoulders after his boys had won the conference championship, my dad winked at me with those marbled, blue eyes and proudly declared I was his good luck charm, lady luck, his daughter, so I grew up around my dad the coach and the game he loved so everything in the world made perfect sense, it all worked, my dad was a talismanic figure, a winner, a hero to the boys and to the community and most of all to me, before my mother left him, before the school fired him, before his drinking picked up the way it did, the way he drank now, resembling a stray dog as I watched him staggering, I spied on my own dad from up on the fourth floor and it broke my heart so bad to see Dad this way so I couldn't face it, I couldn't stand to see him this way, I ran up a couple more flights of stairs as he jangled his keys and opened the back door to his apartment to disappear inside, I hid out from my own dad, I ran up the stairs with my shopping bag full of hotdogs and onions and buns and yellow mustard and waited, a couple flights up from him listening to him stagger inside his apartment, hiding, even though I had intended to spend time with him, for the holiday, we once kept a tradition on Memorial Day to watch a ballgame together and cook hotdogs and grin with the summer upon us, so I wanted to rekindle an old tradition, patches of the American flag sewn on the ballplayers' uniforms, though even more than that I wanted to remind him somebody out there still loved him, because he was my dad, but an anxiety took possession of my legs and I found myself running away from him, I couldn't do it, not this way, I hid out and waited for Dad to disappear into the apartment building with his staggering and his cold beer then I quietly walked down the stairs out to the alley and onto the street and down towards the bus stop, avoiding the potholes and the puddles, I rode the bus back to my own apartment and I didn't turn on the ballgame, I finished some laundry and tidied up a pile of notes for work, I made sure I was prepared for court in the morning, because I was a nervous young attorney, I was fresh out of law school and I was always preparing myself for court, my outfits, my briefcase, I forgot about the ballgame and my dad until a few days later when I found out he had died, he was dead, the contractor my dad worked for had called the police because while he had been on the phone with my dad the contractor heard a pained groan, a scream, then the phone became muffled in silence, so the contractor called the police, then

the police showed up at the apartment building and then an ambulance was called but it was too late, the heart attack had ended my dad's life, Dad was dead, on the floor of his apartment on the fourth floor, so Memorial Day had been my last glimpse of my dad, the echoes of footsteps in the puddles of rain, so after I found out I helped arrange the funeral, I made phone calls and filed paperwork and paid the necessary fees, and the day of my dad's funeral it rained at the cemetery, and my mother refused to show up, but a couple of his buddies were there, his brother Frank, his brother Tom, a few of the players he once coached, several of my friends showed up in the rain and watched the priest offer the rites, the final prayers for the faithfully departed, my dad was born a Catholic and told people he was a Catholic but my dad believed in one thing, a strong infield defense, he had faith in southpaws who could throw off speed put-away pitches, he found purpose between the chalk foul lines, the angles of home plate, first base, his church was a grass field, a dirt mound, baseball was his religion, it was how he made sense of the world, how he separated the confusion and the gray unknown and the chaos of life from the beauty, the harmony, the truth, you didn't need an empty tomb or a blessed sacrament or any rosary beads, you only needed a ball and a bat and a mitt, and the team who deserved to win usually won, and the team who deserved to lose usually had another chance tomorrow, so it rained at my dad's funeral, it was raining and I was thinking about men and baseball and church and death, I held a black umbrella and wore a black dress with a black coat, it rained and I listened vaguely as the priest prayed above the coffin until finally I began to cry in the rain, I'm crying because I had been too ashamed to be with Dad that last time, it was shameful how I hid away from my own dad, embarrassed of what he had become, I left him to himself, a stray dog, instead of being with him and reminding him somebody loved him I bothered myself about court the next morning and what I would wear, but now the season was over and there would be no more at bats for me, so it's tears of regret, I'm crying because he is gone, because of what the world did to him, because of what I did to him, because life isn't like baseball, life isn't as simple as forgetting a bad swing and waiting on a belt high fastball, crying in the rain, it been raining so long you might have forgotten the color of the sky, it rained through the holiday weekend into the next week and it was raining at my dad's funeral, a grounds crew would have been out with the tarp, adding fresh dirt and clay and sand to the mound, it was a break in the rain when I watched him coming down the alleyway,

staggering back to his apartment with his pot-belly and cold beer, I hid away from him because I couldn't stand to see someone who had once been so strong and decisive staggering with a bag full of cold beer cans under his arm, I couldn't stand it because I wanted to believe in what I had learned as a little girl, even though I now knew it was impossible how perfect it had all been, crying because of how perfect it was, with the sun on your neck, a stick of gum in your pocket, calling time to adjust your gloves and enjoy a deep breath, I can't help but cry.

BISHOP

He snapped a button, undid a strap, and there was a kind of sock covering the nub where his leg ended, just below his knee, as he slid the prosthetic off. A tattoo of an eagle had been printed on the calf of the titanium fixture. Tommy explained how he picked a new tattoo each time the doctor resized him. He set the leg down. It had a shoe on it, tied, and it lay on the ground, lifeless.

I don't recall how I reacted, in the dugout, when Tommy showed me.

Shocked?

Intimidated?

Indifferent?

How could I know. I was only a kid.

I didn't have much of an understanding of things.

I remember Tommy showing me his leg, and I remember how he could hit. Could Tommy Bishop hit a baseball. I played four or five years of town ball with him and I remember Tommy shooting gappers into the alleys and launching home runs over the fences, pull side or straight away to center. He was something with a bat.

The boy with one leg.

I also remember a game in particular, a particular instance from the game. I remember that too. I haven't forgotten it.

It must have been early in the season, April. It rained and rained and rained. Nobody anticipated a trip to the Dairy Barn for soft serve swirls of ice cream after the affair ended. It would be warm showers, new clothes, a blanket and a bowl of Campbell's soup.

The batter's box was a muddy pool.

I had been pitching, and it was difficult to find a decent grip on the ball.

I struggled the first time through the order, but we managed to find some runs ourselves and keep the score close.

Back then we only played six innings, and we were the home team.

We were down a run.

The rain hadn't let up.

I saw an offspeed pitch, a curve, which fooled me. Then a fastball, low and away. I had always been a lowball hitter, and I was able to put a good swing on it and drive it opposite field.

Tommy Bishop was on second base and he made a clean jump when my barrel popped with the ball.

Our third base coach waved Tommy home.

The right fielder hit the relay man, the second baseman, then the throw came in.

I held up at first base, hesitating, and I watched as it happened.

Tommy Bishop lost his leg coming into home. It fell off, or cracked, or the strap broke, some kind of malfunction. His arms were pumping. His face was red, determined. He looked as if he was going to beat it out.

Then Tommy was on the ground.

Face first.

His jersey, his forehead, everything about Tommy Bishop was covered in mud.

The catcher on the opposing team stood up out of a crouch, with the ball in his mitt.

Tommy's prosthetic leg was behind him, lifeless, with the shoe and the high sock helpless against the rain.

I had drifted between first and second.

I remember the silence, how quiet it was, with the rain falling.

Tommy looked up at the catcher, standing in front of him. It was only ten feet or so left to go.

I can't remember how I felt.

I can only imagine what Tommy felt, looking up at the catcher.

I remember the silence.

I remember the rain falling.

Then our coach came out of the dugout. He emerged with his clipboard under his arm, and our coach started clapping.

Let's go Tom, he said.

Way to hustle Tom, he said.

You got it, Tom, he said.

Then everyone started clapping. Let's go Tom. Come on Tom. Great hustle. The fans in the bleachers, the coaches, the players. Both teams. Everyone.

Tommy stood up on one leg and jumped towards home plate.

He left the broken leg behind.

The catcher looked at the ball in his mitt. Nobody had said a word to the boy. He took off his mask and waited until Tom reached him, then he put his arm around Tommy Bishop, and helped our hero cross the plate.

The run had scored.

We had tied up the game.

I don't think we kept playing.

It was finished.

The rain still hadn't let up.

More cheering, clapping.

The silence was gone.

I don't remember how I felt about it then, I must have run towards the plate with my teammates and cheered.

I hadn't thought about it in a long while, remembering Tommy Bishop and our tie game in the rain that forgotten April afternoon.

But when I thought about it, the memory brought a great sense of relief.

I had been anxious for a long while but suddenly the anxiety lifted, and I was left with a great sense of relief, because it became suddenly clear to me the world couldn't be such a horrible place.

It had baseball.

FALL CLASSIC

It was supposed to be temporary. A couple of months, at most through the end of the year. Once the insurance company approved the payments. Then they would be back on their feet. Back at the school district their son had grown accustomed to, where their boy could receive the proper support. Sundays at their church. Eating at their neighborhood cafe. It was supposed to be temporary. They had to start from scratch, all their clothes and belongings, their memories and keepsakes. She had taken a leave of absence from work and had spent time in the hospital because of the burns. He had lost his trophies, his medals, the awards from his playing days. It was supposed to be temporary. Worn down planks of siding in need of replacement, repainting, and a rusted handrail up the front steps. No garage. No shed. Ants crawled in lines through the cabinets. The washer didn't work, neither did the air conditioning. The landlord said he would fix things, but he never sent a repair man. Outside it was the highway and horizons of tall, dry corn dancing in the wind, the rustle of corn stalks, leaves, dry and swaying. The house must have been built before the highway. What else could explain its position relative to the interstate, with so

much space, so much open space, nearby? It was supposed to be temporary. Fields of corn. A highway. He would sit on the porch, with a beer and a cigarette, and listen to ballgames on the radio. But once the World Series had been decided he was left with the sound of trucks passing by behind the house. He'd let his vision blur, watching the corn sway. A farmhouse stood about a mile off in the distance, a farmhouse and a barn and three grain silos. Their neighbors. When the night grew late, still outside, he could hear the dry corn stalks swaying in the wind. October. They had moved into the house in March. It was supposed to be temporary. He preferred the ballgame to the sound of the trucks on the highway, and the sound of the trucks on the highway to the rustling corn stalks. The tall, dry corn filled him with a sense of dread. Their insurance company had denied the claim. A legal battle. Paperwork and depositions. Their son was struggling in a new school, the teacher in his classroom didn't have any patience or sympathy for the boy. The support services were meager. The boy's classmates looked at him with suspicion, fear. The boy was nonverbal and could seem confusing to those who weren't used to his mannerisms. It was supposed to be temporary. She couldn't find a new job. She drove into town for groceries and coin laundry. Her sister would call on the telephone and ask how she could help. You can stay with us, her sister said. It was supposed to be temporary. An official investigation conducted by the city declared their boy as the cause for the fire, an arson, so the insurance company refused to honor any property damage claims. They had lost their savings, a photo album from their wedding. The burns left scars. He drank on the porch and she would cry in the bedroom. He washed his car while she flushed ants down the drain of the sink, splashing the water around with her hands. Out in the country, their family, alone with the tall, dry corn stalks and a highway of semi-trucks. They'd never be able to afford a move back to their old neighborhood. With the interest rates, and inflation. Without any other options in front of them, they sold the lot and cut their losses. Debts piled up. A significant piece of the mortgage was outstanding. Medical bills. Therapy for their son. Renting this house, this run down house with the busted appliances, next to the highway, it was all they could afford. It was supposed to be temporary. We'll have to wait a little longer, save some more money, he said. I've been patient, she said. What do you want me to do, he asked. We could go to my sister's, she replied. One of the boy's classmates punched him in the stomach during recess, after lunch. An awkward conference with the principal. It will get better,

he said. We need to move, she said. Where, he asked. To my sister's, she replied. It was supposed to be temporary. The season had ended. He drank. She cried. I'm leaving, she said. This isn't something you can go back on, he said. The boy was in front of the television, eyes fixed, and a baseball was spinning on the wood floor next to where he sat. The corn in the field shook in the wind. A deer was struck dead on the highway. It would be months and months before pitchers and catchers reported for spring training. It was supposed to be temporary.

HENRY

I found out his real name in the newspaper.

Growing up, everyone in the Central League knew him as Slugg.

Slugg Andersen.

I had forgotten about him over the years, but as a kid in high school I imagined one day I would see his jersey number, 19, and position, catcher, on a professional lineup card. Everyone in the Central League figured the stocky nightmare would make it to the show and one day we would be able to say, as old men, we had faced the fierce Slugg Andersen.

He could run.

He could hit.

He could field his position.

Our last game against Bishop MacNamara that season he went 4-4 with a homerun and three doubles. He had picked off a handful of baserunners attempting to steal second. Behind the plate, he'd spit tobacco and talk about our family watching in the stands as we waited for the next pitch.

He was a force.

Intimidating.

Nasty.

Last I had heard of him he had been drafted by the Pirates and was in their farm system.

It was the last I had heard until I saw his name in the newspaper, Henry T. Andersen, arrested for assault and battery, rape.

He'd be waiting at the plate with his eye black, his chin tucked above his shoulder, the barrel of the bat rhythmically bobbing behind his head.

The season had gone reasonably well, I was only a Sophomore and I had earned the confidence and the trust of the coaches, and most of the older guys on the field. A couple of them still wouldn't talk much to

me because I beat out their buddy, a Senior, a kid who had been on the team the previous year. We were both lefties but I threw harder and my stuff had more action.

I wasn't used to being nervous on the mound.

I wasn't cocky, but I was confident when I put my heel on the rubber.

I worked with Roy before the game in the bullpen. Roy chewed ranch flavored sunflower seeds and smelled like a dumbbell. He was an accomplished catcher himself. He warmed me up, and we talked about our plan, sequences of pitches, the signs, whose bat to watch out for.

"What are you going to do with Slugg?" he asked me.

"I don't know," I replied casually.

"Bury one in his hip," I joked.

Roy grabbed my arm. "Listen," he said. "We're gonna pound him inside with the fastball, then you're gonna lope in one of those curveballs on the outside corner. No changeups. I know it's your pitch, but the sonovabitch annihilates changeups."

I had been working on my circle change all through the winter.

"What about the second time through?"

"No changeups."

I missed on my first pitch to Slugg, I left it over too much of the plate, a fastball, and Slugg hit his first double.

The second time through he timed my curve perfect and belted it over the fence.

Coach pulled me out of the game, and as I watched Slugg send another ball into the gap, and then another, I wondered on the bench how Slugg would have handled my change up.

What would Henry 'Slugg' Andersen have done with my circle change?

Apparently Slugg lasted a few seasons in Single-A ball and then fell out of favor with the organization. He played another couple of years, bouncing between teams in the summer, but he couldn't stick anywhere. Another spare part. Used, then discarded. Without any education underneath him, Slugg ended up moving back home, working at a garage, drinking, frustrated.

It was a pair of young, tan legs on a cool Friday night in September. Allegedly he followed the girl, a high school teenager, as she was walking back to her mother's house from a friend's. He rolled down the driver's window and asked the girl to join him in the car. How about a few drinks? Some fun? What do you say? She refused. Then, allegedly, Slugg parked the car and corralled her against her will. In the process she had been knocked unconscious, blunt force trauma. When the young girl came to, she found herself in a forest preserve, about

twenty yards off a trail, leaning on a tree in the woods. She started running and found the trail, then a parking lot, then a payphone. Her underwear was missing. She felt blood. An ambulance drove her to the hospital and everyone's suspicions were confirmed. When the police found Henry at his apartment, he had stuffed her panties inside the cushions of a couch.

I didn't recognize his picture in the newspaper.

Henry T. Andersen.

He wasn't wearing any eye black.

I locked my focus on the image.

What would you have done with my circle change?

BLAMELESS

I drove past a house with a large, sprawling yard and noticed a middle-aged man glaring at his grass with disdain, a look of intense consternation, he must have noticed an uneven patch or some inconsistent coloring, I drove down the road and passed a man who stood on his lawn with a red face, glaring, so I couldn't help but chuckle, it made me laugh to see the man with his vexations, I could only guess he had turned on a sprinkler and decided to inspect his property and that the appraisal had disappointed him, this middle-aged man, he couldn't help it I suppose, you can't help but take it for granted, you can't help but turn the nozzle on the hose and become upset about something as insane and pointless as a swathe of grass, and as I drove away from the man I laughed because I had once been no different from him, I had once curated my own insane and pointless fixations, I couldn't help it either, I thought so many things would matter in my life before I realized how little of it mattered in the way I thought it would, maybe I never inspected my lawn with a grimace but I used to perform similar exercises, my pettiness, my contrivances, until I realized what really mattered, after I lost my boy, because his absence taught me so much, it changed me, unrecognizable, before I lost my boy I had been like everybody else, like the man on his lawn, afforded the luxury of holding insane and pointless fixations, unable to help it, but now I'm chuckling to myself with the image of a man on a front lawn and soon I'll imagine my boy on the grass with his bat hitched up above his shoulder and the brim of his hat pulled down to shade his eyes from the sun, nodding to let me know he's ready for the next pitch, bottom of the ninth, two outs, bases loaded, down three runs, my boy nods and I send in a fastball and the barrel connects, it pops with the sound of contact

and my boy's eyes watch the arc of the moment, deep left field, back, way back, cheering as he rounds the bases with my hands cupped to my mouth imitating the roar of the crowd, his smile, a game winning home run, he loved baseball, my boy, he loved it more than anything in the world, I'd put the ballgame on in his hospital room, the television up in the corner of the room, we'd watch baseball and I'd do my best to distract him but still he was scared, my son knew what was happening to him, he was terrified of the hospital, the look in his eyes was desperate, he would plead to me with his eyes, isn't there a way out, isn't there something you can do, my boy understood what was happening, he wasn't too young to not understand it, so when I couldn't lie to him any longer, when I couldn't tell him he would be out of the hospital in a few weeks, when I couldn't pretend he would be feeling better soon, those last nights, I'm next to him, the chair next to his bed, he's lying back and the machines are humming, tubes are inside of his nose, his stomach, I'm holding his hand and I'm softly telling him about heaven, about the place he's going to, about the ballgames in heaven, leaning over from the chair next to his bed, telling my boy how he'll be able to swing his bat like he did in our yard, how he'll have perfect vision so he'll see the spin of a changeup, and he'll be out in front a little so he'll pull the ball down the left field line, the bat will crack and the ball will go and go over the left field fence with the bases loaded in the bottom of the ninth, I'll tell him not to worry because soon I'll be with him, I'll be in the stands cheering, and I can't wait for us to be together, he loved baseball more than anything else, my boy, I'm in the car driving back from another day, another pointless day, a world of contrivances and fixations and vexed middle-aged men glaring at their front lawns, meaningless, another moment without my boy, my son, the hospital and the ballgames and the smell of the grass, my boy's swing, it was the most beautiful sight I've ever seen, an inside pitch, ripping the barrel through the zone, his eyes on the flight of the ball, I'm driving the car remembering how the last thing I told my son was in heaven you could play as much baseball as you wanted, in sunny ballparks, July afternoons, the stands full, I told my boy about where somebody goes after they die and it wasn't a lie, I had stopped lying to him, he knew what was coming and I quit any phony optimism, he deserved it from me, for me to be as honest as I could with him, so it was the truth, what I said, about heaven and baseball, I told him the truth, because for something as beautiful as my son's swing to

exist, I had no doubt, there had to be a heaven, and if there was ever a heaven, it would have baseball.

THE SCOREKEEPER

It was his third time cutting the grass this season. Most seasons, from May until September, it would be eighteen or nineteen mornings with the lawnmower, to prevent the yard from becoming overrun with ticks and weeds and blooming sprouts. It was the third cut, the end of May, and while the lawnmower was going, as he was maybe halfway through the job, he stopped.

He had been a man who kept track of things.

He filled out the batting order, the positions, kept track of outs, runs, ERA and RBIs, he would sit at the end of the dugout with his book and his pencil for both of his sons' teams through Little League, marking each event, every base hit, every error. He never coached them or encouraged them or frowned at them, he marked whatever happened down in the book with his pencil and then lifted his eyes back to the action on the field.

He had been a serious man.

Some might have called him stiff, or tough, or stern, or reserved. If an acquaintance wanted to pick out a fancy word to describe him, they might have chosen saturnine.

He had been a practical man.

If his son had told him about a new glove another boy on the team had worn to practice, he'd announce, 'The Indian is more important than the arrow.'

He had been a determined man.

Whenever his mind began fill with self-pity, feeling lost, overwhelmed, he remembered Mordecai Brown, 'Three Finger' Brown, inventor of the knuckle-curveball, a two-time World Series champion who built a career on ground balls, pitching to contact. On his father's farm as a boy, Brown had slipped while operating a feed chopper, and instead of resigning himself to anger or despair, Brown turned his disadvantage in hay-bailing to an advantage on the mound.

The man cut the grass on Wednesdays, and he kept count of how many times he had cut the grass each season.

He noted, to himself, silently, as he filled the lawnmower with gas, this would be the third cut of the season.

But now he had stopped.

He is crying.

Sobbing to himself, with several parallel rows cut into the lawn.

He doesn't know why.

He can't make sense of it.

A feeling has come up in him and taken over so he is crying, his eyes, his muscles, inside of his stomach and lungs, a feeling like a wave rushing over his head, a rogue wave he hadn't seen coming, so he isn't at all prepared or ready to fight it back.

He attempts to calm himself, deep breaths for a minute or so, standing there with the lawnmower shut off, with tears on the sleeve of his shirt.

He can't stop crying.

His body refuses to stop.

It had been the third cut of the season, but the lawnmower is shut off. It is cool, early in the morning. He glances at the rows where the lawnmower had been. He looks at the area he has yet to cover.

He noted to himself, silently, as he filled the lawnmower with gas, there might be another fifteen or sixteen cuts left in the season.

He's alone, overcome with tears.

A robin drops down and plucks at the grass, in the area the man still has to finish.

A cloud burns up in the sun.

It's been such a long time, a long, long time.

PRIVILEGE

Mickey Thomas had one of those fathers who brought his son to a different Major League ballpark every summer. The Thomas' were a wealthy family and they were able to create a tradition based on their economic means. Mickey's grandfather owned several car dealerships, so Mickey would show up every spring with a new pair of cleats bragging about how he was flying with his father to Cincinnati or Florida to eat hot dogs in the stands wearing the colors of a team they didn't truly support. Mickey's mother was blonde and so was his sister and they would sit with Mickey's father in the bleachers cheering their boy on.

Lazo Vukelic's father was buried in another country so the young boy would rush home when the school bus dropped him off at the Sheffield Court apartments, grab his worn glove which had been bargained for at a yard sale, and run the twelve blocks to the fields for practice.

If there was a game on a Saturday morning Lazo's Uncle Dino might show up in a security guard uniform, clocked out from an overnight shift and buzzing on cheap wine, to root on his nephew. Dino would scream out, 'Get that base, Lazo! Get the base!' Uncle Dino didn't understand

much about baseball, but he was a jovial drunk. Dino felt compelled to keep an eye on his brother's son because who else was there to do it? Not to mention he was the boy's godfather. Dino had no children of his own, no wife. The lanky, grinning man wasn't ashamed about trying to make it with chubby women and since Dino worked overnight shifts most of his wine drinking took place in the morning. 'Get the base, Lazo!' Lazo always smiled when he heard Dino's voice. The boy adored his uncle. Dino would drink too much wine at the Vukelic family picnics on Sundays and tell stories about women he chased and their huge breasts. Dino would hand the boy a cigar and warn him not to tell his mother. Lazo was Dino's godson, and he knew Dino was there for him, whatever he needed.

The boy didn't say much to Mickey Thomas, or any of the other kids on the team, and the other kids would look at Lazo funny when his uncle would start shouting from the bleachers.

But Lazo didn't mind.

In the autumn the boy would play catch by himself in the parking lot of Sheffield Court, tossing the ball as high as he could in the air, and he would keep score with two teams in his head, the Sox and one of their AL rivals. If Lazo caught it, it would be an out. If he dropped it, a run would score. Lazo would be out with his glove until late at night, lofting the ball up in the air for hours and hours, keeping score in his head, pennant races won or lost over the course of an evening under the electric blue streetlight. As Lazo's skills progressed he would add new rules, new combinations of plays, with only a ball and a mitt and the aluminum dusk of the parking lot. Cars would file in, from offices and factories, kids and parents. Lazo might ask a neighbor to throw one up heavenwards, or to skip him a ground ball. It was as close as Lazo came to dreaming, under the potency of twilight.

Uncle Dino would stop by occasionally to check in. Sometimes they would walk over to the Tasty Pup for a hot dog and Dino would tell Lazo about one of his girlfriends. The storefront had a painted red sign with white letters, A GARDEN ON A BUN, CHICAGO ORIGINAL. Inside there was a poster of a giant hotdog, tied onto a barge alongside Navy Pier, with mustard being squirted out of a firefighter boat by several hoses, and sport peppers delivered via helicopters. Dino would buy the boy a milkshake then tousle his hair. 'Lazo,' he would lament, 'if I had your looks, my girlfriends would be much prettier.'

Kids like Mickey Thomas played in the autumn travel leagues and took private lessons in the winter but Lazo didn't care, he didn't think

much of them. Most of Lazo's close friends had to work a job starting in middle school, quitting sports for good, so Lazo figured being able to play any baseball was a privilege. Homer Paloma had a paper route and Zag Messino cleaned out the locker room of a boxing gym. Lazo helped stock groceries at a local market, but in the spring his mother let him quit the job temporarily in order to make the practices and the games. As the seasons went on, Lazo built himself into a tough out, and he learned how to catch a solid game behind the plate. With the gear on, his chest protector and shin guards, behind the mask, Lazo felt confident. He didn't mind a collision or a close call. He relished in a batter crowding the zone. And his throw to second was superb. Uncle Dino began to learn more about the game. 'Wait for your pitch, Lazo!'

One Saturday afternoon in May, near the end of the season, Lazo watched Mickey Thomas walk into the box from the on-deck circle. Mickey's uniform seemed to glow. His bat was free from blemishes, and Mickey wore batting gloves like the big leaguers. Lazo took him inside, then outside. Fastball, then a changeup. Next he asked for a curve, but the pitcher didn't snap it properly and the ball didn't break, instead of dipping it hung, so Mickey hit the cement mixer to deep right field. Lazo took his mask off as Mickey took off from the batter's box. He watched as Mickey went around first, missing the bag with his outside foot, then gallop into second with a stand-up double. Lazo turned to the umpire, 'Did you see that? He missed the bag!'

The umpire didn't respond.

Lazo shouted to the second baseman holding the ball.

'Throw it to first! Now! It's a force!'

The second baseman threw the ball in to the first baseman.

The umpire signaled the out.

The inning was over.

Mickey Thomas was dismayed. 'Hey! What the hell was that?'

The coach from Mickey's team was out of the dugout asking the same question. Lazo's team had begun to retreat from the field, but Lazo stayed behind. He gathered up his mask and held it next to his hip. He listened as the umpire explained the call.

Mickey Thomas had rushed in from second base to join his coach.

'That's a bunch of crap! I hit the bag. I know I did. You don't know what you saw!'

Mickey's coach expressed a similar sentiment.

The umpire was calm. Another explanation was provided. Mickey's foot had missed the bag. The force was on at first base. The inning was over.

'I saw it too, you missed it,' said Lazo.

Mickey glared. 'You don't know what you saw, you fleabag Ukkie!'

Uncle Dino was drunk on cheap wine, in the bleachers, watching.

The umpire told everyone to go back to their dugouts.

The inning was over.

Lazo smiled at Mickey. 'Nice hit.'

Mickey swung at Lazo and connected, sending the boy to the ground.

The umpire shoved Mickey and Mickey's coach away from Lazo, who was back on his feet checking his lip for blood.

Mickey's father was in the stands, shouting, 'Don't let them push you around, son!'

Uncle Dino stood up. 'That's your boy?'

'Sure is.'

'Well, your boy is a coward!'

'Who the hell are you?'

'Your boy is a coward so you must be one too!'

Mickey's father stormed Uncle Dino, but in an instant Dino had wrestled the man off the bleachers and onto the ground, where Dino knelt above him, grasping his collar. Dino swung from his left and then his right, landing punches in the man's gut, his face.

Lazo winked at Mickey as the umpire ejected Mickey and his coach from the game.

The league officials would suspend Mickey for the rest of the season.

Mickey's mother was screaming, 'Somebody help! Arrest this man! Arrest him! Assault and battery!'

Uncle Dino was a jovial drunk but now he was sober, he was the brother to a man killed in a foreign war, he was the uncle to an orphan, he was a first-generation immigrant who had been called names, scoffed at, kicked to the curb, who was tired, and fed up, and decided enough was enough.

Lazo made his way to the dugout, and his teammates gave him high fives, clapping, supporting him.

'That kid's a rich prick, Lazo.'

'What a cheap shot.'

'Wait 'til they see what you do to the ball on your next at bat.'

Uncle Dino adjusted his security uniform and walked away from Mickey Thomas' father. Mrs. Thomas was screaming, yelling, but Dino paid her no attention. He strolled from the bleachers to the parking lot, then

to the street, towards the bus stop where he would catch the Number 35 westbound, back to his apartment, for a nap, maybe a little more wine. Lazo would drive home the winning run in the bottom of the sixth. Mickey Thomas and his father, later that summer, would watch the Colorado Rockies lose to the San Francisco Giants in an irrelevant game, and the boy would complain to his father about wanting another lemonade as they left the EXIT gate.

OBITUARY

The afternoon rain fell on the rooftops of the hospital, May, a dreary afternoon with the pigeons huddled together, I noticed the pigeons and the gray skies out the window as I set down the lunch tray in front of the man, he had a visitor in the chair next to him, I had knocked on the door and announced 'Meal service' and walked in with a tray of food, for an old man with a room in Cardiology, I wheeled my cart with the shelves along hallways between different units to fulfill patient orders and I knocked on the door before I walked in with his lunch, and the man was frail, he had gray hair underneath a ballcap, it was odd to see a patient wearing a ballcap but the man was wearing a ballcap, and it was odd too because I seemed to recognize the logo on the front of his ballcap, I couldn't quite say what it was but I seemed to recognize it and the wrinkled man smiled at me when I set the tray down, but I could tell I had interrupted their conversation, the splotchy skinned man and his visitor, I was accustomed to interrupting conversations, sadnesses and joys, rooms would become silent as I entered then the noise would pick back up as I left, as if my presence required a deep reverence, I had become comfortable interrupting conversations since I had been working at the hospital for a couple of years and I was indifferent to the smell of the hospital, the nurses in the hallways, the sadnesses and joys, the ticking clocks, the nitrile gloves, I had graduated high school in a special education tracks and I was living with my parents, but the job was steady, I knew what to do, it didn't confuse me or frustrate me, my boss was kind, so with the rain coming down I removed the lid of the tray and began to walk out and I could hear their conversation picking back up, the gaunt man said to his visitor, 'Say hello to all the boys for me,' that was what I heard as I was leaving, 'Tell them Mac says so long, for now,' and I was headed to the Maternity Ward full of crying babies and exhausted mothers, I set the lid in my cart and I clicked the brake off the wheel caster and I went down the hallway with the other lunches, the other trays, I understood

hospitals to be buildings where people begin their lives or where their lives end, you go inside a hospital to die or you come out with a baby, so the man must have been in pretty bad shape by the way he looked and the way he said 'Tell them Mac says so long, for now,' made it seem like the man wasn't coming back out, like he was going to die, and the way the man said it made it seem like the boys weren't his children, somehow I knew the boys weren't related to the old man by blood, the boys were close to him but they weren't his sons, but he loved the boys, and the boys loved him, so I pushed my cart along towards the crying babies in the Maternity Ward and settled back into my routine but I didn't forget the man, outside the hospital after my shift with the oily puddles of rain and the pigeons flapping, I rode the bus to the train and then the train to my parents' house and I went to sleep and the next morning at the breakfast table my father sat upright his coffee and his newspaper, 'Mac Lundgren died last night,' my father said it outloud for my mother and I to hear and somehow immediately I knew Mac Lundgren was the man in the hospital bed, the man with the sparse gray hair, sickly, gaunt, with the splotchy skin and the visitor at his bedside, wearing the ballcap with the logo I had seen before because my father owned a similar ballcap, and my mother put her arm on my father the way she did when she knew he needed to feel her touch and asked quietly wasn't Mac Lundgren his coach for Legion ball, she asked but my mother knew already Mac Lundgren had coached my father when he was younger and played for an American Legion team, Mac had been coach of the Legion Post #46 out of Conway, and my father had played for Mac, like many young men in the area, Legion Post #46 with the aluminum shovel and the bag of rock salt next to the front door year round, the gold star on the sign hung out front on the siding, the bar counter inside with the peanuts and the cold beer on tap, Mac had a reputation for being an ingenious strategist, he signaled for squeeze bunts, double steals, Mac could manufacture runs out of thin air, a manager who built his teams for speed and contact at the plate, fundamentals in the field, my father talked about Mike Flanagan and Carlton Fisk because Mac had coached them on the fundamentals, Mac taught his boys the proper way to play the game, each game was a battle and Mac was a general, a general whose troops adored him, because Mac argued with umpires on their behalf and never berated them from the dugout publicly, he always pulled a young man aside and shared his mind concisely, and you never wanted to disappoint Mac, my father hated to ever disappoint his coach, so his summers playing Legion ball made an impression on my

father, I had heard of Mac Lundgren before, the lessons passed on from the general to his troops, so when my father explained who Mac Lundgren was I knew already, and so did my mother, but my mother had a way of opening up a space when my father needed to say something, because I think it was difficult for my father to say certain things out loud, but she knew when he needed to say something and at breakfast that morning my father needed to talk about his summers playing Legion ball for Mac, and when my father was done, when he finished telling us about how Mac would watch opposing pitchers and analyze their tendencies, how many inches a two seam fastball might run away on the arm side of one pitcher, or how far a curve might lope in and drop on another, and how to catch the spin of a diving glove-side slider, the fade of a changeup, how Mac would share all this with his boys, when my father finished telling us about Mac Lundgren I knew it was now the moment for me to speak up and say something, so I cleared my throat, and I was never a big talker at the breakfast table but I explained to my father about the man in the Cardiology wing, wearing the ballcap with the familiar logo, about how I had taken a turkey sandwich to the man and how he had thanked me for it, how he had smiled, and how a visitor had been in the room with the man, how he'd told the visitor 'Tell them Mac says so long, for now,' as I was leaving the room with the lid of the tray I had caught the man's last words, before I shut the door behind me, how he had said 'Tell them Mac says so long, for now,' and my father looked silent, his eyes changed, the way his eyes were focused on me, I could tell it meant something to my father I had seen the man, his former coach, Mac Lundgren, I had heard those last words leaving the room, before the man died, and since I was there, I could tell my father about it, it meant something very important, and the sun was shining in the kitchen and my mother was smiling and I felt as important as I had ever felt in my whole life, like I had done something very important for my father, the way my father looked before he reached over and hugged me and thanked me for telling him about what the man had said as I was leaving the room with the lid of the tray, back to the cart in the hallway.

RELIEF

I should have been relieved to see him. I turned the lock on the front door, opened it, and he was sitting at the table with our mother. It had been over two months since he had left for a cup of coffee and never returned. My mother called the counselor at the facility, the

police, his friends. Eventually she learned that he wasn't dead or in jail, but he was back running again. It's what my brother did, he cleaned up for a few months, then went back out. He'd disappear, then reappear.

I should have been relieved to see him, but I wasn't. It felt more like a dream than anything, a strange dream, surreal. My brother had pulled us all into a strange dream, where we wouldn't be able to find him for months at a time, we'd be worried and anxious, and then he would show up with his apologies and promises. It was surreal the way a dream was, it felt impossible, like it somehow broke the rules of physics. But it was our life. And it affected Mom, it tore at her, the emotions. It was more a nightmare for her than a dream, the way it affected my mother. I used to cry when my brother would come home, hug him, tell him I loved him. Back in the beginning, when it first started happening, I would be relieved to see him. But now, as I walked into our house and shut the front door, noticing him, I didn't say a word. I went straight to my room. I didn't say anything to my brother. My mother stood up from the table and came into my room and asked me why I didn't say anything to my brother. I asked her what was I supposed to say. I was tired, back from baseball practice, and I wanted to lay down in my bed before dinner. What was I supposed to say? Welcome back?

She was so caught up in my brother's strange dream, I don't think she had any time to reflect on how the situation might be affecting me.

He was a good guy, when he wasn't on heroin.

He was a good brother, when he wasn't out running.

I had spent the last two summers working at Camp Jabberwocky, on the Vineyard, and one of the other counselors, Vinny, had a sister in a similar situation as my brother. Then, one night, Vinny's parents woke him up because of their screaming and yelling. His sister had died, an overdose. Her friends had left her body in a parking lot where they had been injecting themselves with needles, behind an office building. She was blue and lifeless and the police had called their house to tell them the sad news. I told Vinny about my brother, and I told Vinny that I was scared that the same thing was going to happen to us. Vinny said I should say something to my brother, tell him how I felt about his addiction, his drug use.

I did.

Nothing changed.

So I tried to focus on baseball, on finding a scholarship for next fall. My fastball was lively, it had good movement and I had gained

some velocity from lifting weights in the offseason. Coach said I threw a heavy ball, and I could have a shot at receiving some money to play at the college level. I was swinging a good bat, too, I had a great feel for the zone and kept myself disciplined behind the plate. I was leading the team in on base percentage, and walks.

I tried not to focus on my brother.

I tried to stay connected to reality, and not this strange dream.

My mother stood in my room, in front of my bed, after I had asked her again what I was supposed to say.

Don't you care that he's safe, that he's back home, that he's going to go back to his meetings?

No, I told her.

No?

No, I told her again. I'm sick of him dragging us along into his chaos. I'm trying to focus on what is going to be positive for me. I can't get wrapped up in his strange dream anymore.

My mother was silent, considering what I had said, standing in front of my bed.

I couldn't understand my brother's addiction, why he made the choices he made, why he put us through the stress and the anxiety. I assumed it was under his control. Since he kept on doing this to us, I blamed him for it. I thought that if he only cared about us more, especially our Mom, he wouldn't disappear to shoot heroin. He didn't love us. He didn't care.

My coach said he would make some phone calls for me. He thought I could get a scholarship, that I could play college ball.

He doesn't have any control over it, my mother said to me. It's not his fault.

He's not a little kid, I said to her. We all have control over our actions. It's his fault. He's going to give you a heart attack, and that will be his fault too.

Don't say that, she said to me.

The next summer, while I was away at Camp Jabberwocky, on the Vineyard, I spent time working with a kid named Felix. Felix had been born without part of his brain, so life for him was difficult, it was harder than I had ever seen it for somebody. He couldn't talk. He couldn't tie his shoes. He couldn't cut up his own food. But Felix would smile. He'd smile when we parked the camp bus alongside the street near the beach. He'd smile as we'd wheel him out onto the sand. We would put him in a lifejacket and take him out in the waves, and his smile, Felix would smile ear to ear out in the water. Floating in

the sea, with the waves bobbing Felix up and down, it helped me out more than anything.

I didn't know why my brother used drugs, why he couldn't enjoy his life, why he overdosed and died and broke Mom's heart.

I didn't understand my brother, I couldn't make sense of him or what he did.

SOLSTICE

It was a long walk back to the apartment from the clinic, seventeen city blocks, I could have rode the bus but I walked instead because the walking would do me good, the walking would clear my head, the methadone would kick into my blood and I'd enjoy a cigarette and my feet would glide underneath me, the night would press down on the sidewalks and the glow of the streetlights would reflect off glass windows, I might even see a pretty girl, I'd smoke a cigarette and walk and I would feel alright, I'd feel alright walking up to the concrete stoop of the apartment building I called home, the red bricks with the iron banister up to the door, I would feel alright as I turned a key to the main door, headed down the hall, up four flights of stairs, but sometimes I'd linger outside on the stoop for another cigarette, I'd feel at ease, it would be dark and the darkness covering the street was proof of something, it was proof of change, of time passing, of silence, and the black of night was restful and it helped me, when the sun had fallen out of the sky, and I'd walk home to my apartment after my dose of medication, I'd linger on the stoop smoking a cigarette and I'd enjoy the quiet because the street I lived on was quiet, a residential street, it ran off from the main intersection with its restaurants and clubs and shops, I was tucked away from everything, a safe haven in the bustling city, quiet, dark, but that evening after I had walked back from the clinic, on the stoop with my cigarette, I didn't feel at ease, I didn't feel alright, it was summer and the sky refused to kick the blue out of itself, by the time I reached my stoop after the seventeen blocks it still hadn't turned to black, it was a bruised kind of blue, like the day wouldn't quit, somehow the day refused to quit, and the light, it must have been almost ten o'clock, I lit a cigarette and looked up at the sky, goddamnit I thought, the day won't quit, it was muggy and beads of sweat glued my skin to my shirt, pressed to my back, the methadone hadn't relaxed me the way I had come to rely on, maybe it had to do with humidity, the heat, the bruised blue left in the sky, my shirt stuck to my back, goddamnit, it was all I could think, it had been six

months walking to the clinic, six months of government checks, waking up to fry myself a cheese sandwich at the burner, with my pan, with my loaf of bread and butter and slices of Kraft, down the street to the corner store for a pack of smokes, waking up to listen through the walls as my neighbors bustled in and out, they came and went, doors opening and shutting, six months, I knew for certain if I didn't clean up this time around I'd wind up dead, another overdose, another veteran, another statistic, six months ago I had parked my belongings behind a Burger King where I had made camp with a girl named Lucy, it had been an insane three months during the summer with us in love and dopesick and screaming and broke and stealing and high, we had made a real mess of each other, running together, you figure something like that might go on forever when you're inside of it but one afternoon I noticed a man with his two boys crossing the street to avoid us, to make sure he didn't bump into Lucy and I, and the man wearing his button down shirt looked over his shoulder at us with his arms around his two boys and finally I had seen enough, it was the way the man crossed the street then looked back at us, to check and make sure he was clear of us, clear of trouble, I had put up with enough of Lucy, she was sleeping with other men, and I put up with enough of me being sick, enough of a pending court case, I had enough so that afternoon I cooked up one last shot for myself then I called the VA hotline, I asked the woman's voice I spoke with to send me a checker cab and I volunteered myself into a detox center, my signature on the line, the facility was part of a VA hospital, and after a week of being too sick to move I began to clear up from the fog, I came out of the haze and I ate a good meal and I went for a walk and I found an apartment and all the while I kept thinking back to the man in the button down shirt with his two boys, so when one of the counselors brought up methadone as a treatment option I told him I hadn't tried it, so I talked more with the counselor then with the doctors, and they decided I should try it, I received a prescription and I signed in for group therapy sessions three days a week, because counseling was a requirement in order to receive the medicine, so I'd show up to a building downtown three days a week and I'd check in at the desk with the receptionist and once I made it up to the room the facilitator would usually ask a question or two as a prompt then we would talk about being addicts, talk about our day, talk about how hard it was to kick a habit, to stay kicked, a group of recovering addicts, we'd discuss what triggered us to use, why transitioning back to normal life had been near impossible, how nobody ever warned us about any of it when we

enlisted, it was guys I could understand because the group was made up of veterans and folks in recovery so I didn't mind going downtown for the sessions, we could relate to each other, I felt like one of the boys again, like I belonged, it was our unit, but as the sessions went on there were guys who would speak in our round circle one day and never came back the next, they disappeared and we never found out what happened to them, but we knew, they had kids, they had jobs, they had things to lose but they never came back, you didn't have to ask, you knew what happened to them but still you wondered about their wife or their girlfriend or their twin girls with the red hair, because you had heard about their wife or their girlfriend or their daughters, you knew, but you still wondered, and every evening I would walk the seventeen blocks and wait my turn in line at the clinic, I waited around most evenings for hours, the paper work, the drug tests, the staff would look at you the way they did, and after I'd received my dose of the medicine I would usually walk the seventeen blocks back to the apartment, unless it was raining or freezing cold and I'd feel alright, I'd think how good it was to be clean, it was better to be clean than to be running, desperate to score, insane with the fix, the needles and the baggies, it felt good to not be confined to live in six hour intervals, a confined and cramped world of dealers and hookers and cutthroats, a world that didn't care about you, a world that only wanted your five dollar bill or something out of your baggie, so I felt alright, I was a veteran and a junkie but I was back home and clean, I was in group therapy, I was on a daily regimen, and I wanted it to last, I didn't want to die, I didn't want any more looks like the one I caught from the man in the button down shirt with his two kids, but it was the damp heat of concrete and the stubborn daylight left in the sky, goddamnit was all I could think or say to myself, goddamnit, a bruised kind of blue, six months clean and what for, what was the use, I wanted to shout, I had a terrible urge to yell as loud as I could, the urge flexed across the insides of my neck muscles, it pulsed in waves behind my eyes, I wanted to shout, to scream, to hit the street, to find Lucy camped out behind the Burger King, to cook up a shot, to run, to score another bag, to ditch the apartment and the cheese sandwiches, goddamnit, and I had decided I would let the shout come out, I would let it come through me however it would, because what was the use, but before I did, before I let go I closed my eyes and I saw those two young boys and the man walking to the other side of the street, checking over his shoulder back at me, nervous, afraid, his look was full of confusion and pity, protecting

his boys from me, I watched him look over his shoulder so I opened my eyes and went inside the apartment and I walked up the four flights of stairs and I fell asleep because I had a group session the next day and I didn't want the boys wondering what happened to me, even though they would know, they would know exactly what happened.

BATTING ORDER

It was the same as it ever had been, the cute girls with the athletic boys, the kids from money with the kids from money, it had always been this way.

That's what she was telling herself.

It was in her bed, late at night.

She was adding up the figures in her head, making sense of what happened earlier in the day, her eyes were closed and inside of her was an image of Hank and Carol, his arms around her waist, it had been after school, in the parking lot next to Hank's car.

It was silly to believe anything existed between them, between her and Hank, it was silly for you to think it.

That's what she figured.

Hank played baseball and drove a new car his father had bought him, he was off to college in the fall. Girls like Carol ended up with boys like Hank, it had always been this way, it was the same as it had ever been. Girls like Carol ended up with boys like Hank, and you would end up with a boy like dad, like how mom had met dad, at the church picnic. You would find a nice boy whose father didn't have any money, who learned to work an honest trade to make ends meet, to pay the bills. It would be a fine life, a good life, and you would be a lucky woman for living it. Don't be silly.

It was in her bed, late at night.

This is what she was saying to herself.

She was up late, in her bedroom, and her younger sister asleep next to her under the same comforter, the same sheets. She and her younger sister shared a bed, and the baby slept in the crib in the corner of the room. Next door her two brothers were sleeping in the same bed, in the same room as their mother and father. Two bedrooms, five people. Double shifts at the docks. Hand me down clothes.

It had always been this way. Boys like Hank didn't come to dinner and eat at tables like the one in your kitchen, with your mother's dishes, chuck ground beef, boiled cabbages. Girls like Carol would host Hank, fix him a cocktail in a living room, there would be a couch and a small table where he could set down the glass on a coaster, talking

politics with her father, the upcoming election. You shouldn't have been so silly.

She sighed.

It was the same as it had ever been, the same as it ever was. Your situation was no different. You didn't do anything wrong. It was only silly to think there was something between you two, between Hank and you. Put it out of your head. Don't be silly.

It was early in the morning.

She was tired, and her eyes were closed, and her sister was sleeping next to her in the bed.

It's the same as it has always been. There's an order to things. There's a reason behind the way things work out. You can't fight against it.

This is how she had it figured.

Sixteen years old, and she was thinking about it this way, with her kid sister asleep next to her.

It's alright. Just don't be so silly about it anymore. It was always going to be this way, so what was the use. It was the same as it had ever been.