

ABSTRACT

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Thesis Directed by: Professor Howard Norman
Department of English

Daughters of the Diamond is a collection of nine stories exploring the intimate connection between women and baseball. Wives, lovers, sisters, and daughters; observers, fans, and athletes; the nine individual protagonists each experience the pull of the diamond in a unique way, either because of childhood assimilation into the sport, because of what the game means to the men they love, or because they find something in baseball that doesn't exist anywhere else in their worlds. Whether on the minor league fields of Maine and North Carolina, in the stands of Fenway Park and Camden Yards, or at a card show in Virginia, baseball is the thread that connects these women, and to each one of them, it is more than merely a game. In the tradition of Kinsella, Updike, and King, these stories all evoke the mysticism of the sport, but from a uniquely feminine perspective.

DAUGHTERS OF THE DIAMOND:
NINE STORIES

by

Michelle Hélène Von Euw

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Howard Norman, Chair
Professor Maud Casey
Professor Merle Collins

Dedication

To my father, David Von Euw,
and my husband, Joe Rodano,
men who not only understand but encourage
this woman's obsession with baseball

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The First Inning: The Diamond

The dark sky was shattered by a golden beam as the stadium lights suddenly illuminated the velvet stretch of grass before us. The players -- assembled in two even rows along the first and third baselines -- let out a collective gasp, and the stands reverberated with the crowd's applause. The miracle of light had finally reached Greyfield, Maine, our tiny town east of everywhere.

I remember this day more than any other in my collection of memories. My father held me up on his shoulders from where I could look down onto the faded baseball caps of the fans around us, forming the largest crowd the baseball field ever held. My brother was one of the spotless figures lined up in front of the dugouts, wearing the clean white uniform a man in a big car had left at our house that morning. He shaded his eyes with his ungloved hand, and when he found me, he waved. I watched him as he motioned to the lights glowing brightly above, and I imagined the smile on his face foretold great things to happen under their watch.

“God turned on the sun,” exclaimed a tiny voice, evoking an explosion of laughter. I scorned the simplistic thought. I knew better than that. I was five years old, and I understood all about how stadium lights worked.

“Look at those beams,” my father had said to me that April during a Royals-Brewers matchup, pointing to a Molitor homerun floating between the foggy glow and the thick white poles. “When I was your age, the fields were dark at night. Now, thanks to those giant lights, baseball is no longer contained to the daytime.”

“Does every park have lights?”

“Every one but Wrigley Field. The Cubs will probably never play under the light – they’re traditionalists out there in Chicago, you know.”

“Kind of like us.”

“Exactly.”

Baseball was everything to us. We had no religion, no folklore, no politics, no mama, only baseball. From my father’s shoulders, I watched my brother pick up his glove and jog easily to his spot in centerfield, the dark grass now illuminated, almost daylight bright. Bigger teams, richer towns all through Maine had lights long before we did in Greyfield, but that night, our own Legion field was inexplicably transformed by the glow, the weeds and the unevenness of the baselines hidden, only the crisp perfection of the nine players lined up around the symmetric diamond visible under the night lights.

I didn’t know much about fundraising or political maneuvers back then, but now I imagine the effort it took to bring those lights was substantial. And it might have had

something to do with Greyfield's centerfielder, the sixteen year old inside a grown man's body, the inflated batting average, the glove described in glowing terms, the fabled nickname, and maybe even the unusual upbringing, all of which had attracted significant outside attention, by media, by scouts, by major league ball clubs. Under their protective beams, my brother stretched out his perfectly starched white uniform, tugging the brim of his navy blue ball cap down over his eyes, hitting the palm of his glove, as if daring the batter, now taking his place at the plate, to try to hit the ball anywhere near my brother's watch in centerfield.

"Dad, I want to hear about Tinker to Evers to Chance."

"Is it bedtime already?" My father looked up from his lined pad of paper and the local Greyfield newspaper. Every night after supper, the three of us sat around the large oak table that once served as my grandfather's desk. Dad was crafting another of his brilliant rants against Astroturf, the designated hitter or free agency, that our local newspapers were tired of printing by then. Joe was supposed to be studying the careful notes my father kept on opposing pitchers, but instead slapped his chemistry textbook over the small printed letters cramped in between the pale blue lines. My task for that evening was multiplication tables, but I had *Baseball for Young Boys*, published some twenty years before, open instead, and I used the subject headers to get my dad's side of the story – the only one I wanted. Last week, it was Babe Ruth. This week, I was determined to learn something new.

"Not bedtime – just tell me now."

My dad put down his pad of paper with a sigh, but I could tell he looked forward to his speech. "Joe Tinker, Johnny Evers and Frank Chance were infielders who played together on the Chicago Cubs at the turn of the century," he said, stretching his long fingers as if preparing for serious business. "Only Chance was really all that good of a ballplayer, but all three of them are in the Hall of Fame, linked together because one ridiculous New York columnist wrote a bad poem – 'making a Giant hit into a double' – immortalizing them for all time."

"So they weren't really that good?"

"It'd be like anointing Cal Ripken, Billy Ripken and Jim Traber for the twenty-two double plays they turned last year."

"Is there any way you can move this fascinating lesson upstairs?" Joe interrupted, slamming shut his textbook. "I have an exam to study for."

"You don't need chemistry in the minors," my dad said. "You should be looking at those pitch counts I gave you, not studying for a worthless test."

"I'm going to college."

"You're signing with the Dodgers."

"Just because some scout is a former teammate of yours doesn't mean LA is going to draft me. Even if they do, I don't care – it's not like I'm going to be able to do this forever, dad, and I'm not going to be like this, live like this – "

My brother scooped up his textbooks and stormed outside, slamming the door behind him. These confrontations were becoming more and more frequent, and while I

worshipped my brother, I had no idea why he'd ever want anything away from the Diamond.

Even then, I knew we were different: I'd had dinner at friends' houses, where parents worked and cooked and talked about movie stars and presidents, knew there were lives with priorities that didn't include the seventh inning stretch. But an existence that didn't center around baseball seemed so empty, so pointless to me.

"Are you ready for bed, kiddo?"

I nodded, tucking the baseball book under my arm before trudging up the wooden stairs, wondering if Joe would be back before I fell asleep, if he'd drive me to school in the morning or if I'd have to walk the poorly paved roads on my own. The book stayed on my night table; sometimes I'd sneak a flashlight under my covers and read about Joe DiMaggio and Jackie Robinson. Even at seven, I slept with my dad's last glove from the minors, the stitches frayed and the leather falling apart, but still carrying traces of a rough ball, of green bright grass, of my dad, strong and young, squatting behind home plate, and smiling up at the pretty girl in the third row who'd become, ever so briefly, my mother.

"What do you want to hear tonight?"

"Shoeless Joe."

My dad let out a low laugh. "Of course."

My brother's namesake, our family's major deity, above all other minor gods in baseball folklore. Shoeless Joe Jackson, greatest hitter, greatest outfielder, strong and silent and wanting nothing but baseball; tragically, it was the one thing taken away from

him. My dad was never more focused, more passionate, more alive than when he railed against the injustices surrounding Shoeless Joe Jackson and his lifetime ban from the game of baseball.

“And where should we begin?”

That night, I’d had enough of my dad’s anger. I wanted a happy story. “Tell me about Granddaddy.”

“Ah. It was a hot July day of 1917. In two years, your granddaddy would be sent to Europe to fight the Germans, but in that hot summer, war was still very far off. My father had dreams, big dreams, of becoming a captain of industry – you know what I mean by that?”

I nodded, rubbing the side of the worn glove I’d slept beside since I was a baby.

“It was a Sunday afternoon, and there was a hitting contest in Fenway Park. My uncle Bill convinced his brother, your granddaddy, to leave the office and spend a few hours in the bleachers, watching all the greats – Ty Cobb, Tris Speaker, Babe Ruth, of course, and Shoeless Joe – competing against each other. Shoeless Joe won the thing going away – slammed a ball right into the Coca-Cola sign, leaving a dent they could never hammer out, no matter how hard they tried.”

“What did granddaddy do?” I said, urging my dad through the familiar story.

“He left the contest. He wanted so badly to get back to work, he didn’t stick around to see who won it. But as he was walking across Landsdowne Street, a ball bounced over the Green Monster and landed at his feet. From the roar of the crowd, he knew the ball had been hit by Shoeless Joe, and he picked it up and put it in his pocket.”

“Skip ahead,” I said, unable to stifle a yawn.

“That night, he was taking the train home, and there on the platform, going to back to Chicago, was Shoeless Joe Jackson. Granddaddy walked up to the ballplayer, and told him how impressed he’d been with his swing. Shoeless Joe thanked him with that thick South Carolina accent of his, and then your granddaddy reached into his pocket, and realized the ball was still there.”

I forced myself to stay awake for the very end of the story, my favorite part.

“Legend has it Shoeless Joe could not write, and they claim when he signed the deal with the gamblers who wanted his help throwing the 1919 World Series, he marked a big X and not his name. But on a hot Sunday evening in Boston two years before, he left his name in big looping letters across the side of a baseball that now sits in your very living room.”

“Every minute of every day, somewhere someone in this world is playing baseball,” my dad said from the front seat of our big old station wagon, turning down a sun-drenched highway one early November. I don’t remember the year, don’t recall exactly where we were headed, just somewhere south, somewhere away from the snow-covered fields of Maine and toward a diamond where baseball lived on.

“That’s impossible,” Joe said from beside me, a pile of school books and papers stacked between us and around us. I had a school bag, a blue striped one with the shoulder strap attached with safety pins, but I refused to open it except when forced,

and my dad couldn't monitor my studying if I were sitting directly behind him. I was the strategic one.

"No, it's true," my dad insisted. "There are leagues all over the world – Japan, Denmark, Ghana, Australia, Russia alone has eleven different time zones, and when we're asleep in our beds, somewhere it's sunny, somewhere there's daylight, and somewhere a pitcher is trying to figure out which would be the perfect pitch – slider, curve, or fastball – to strike out the side."

"Dad, what was the furthest away you played baseball?"

"Nowhere that different, never outside the U.S.," he said, and I could imagine his expression, even though from my vantage point all I could see was the fading patches of his blond-grey hair.

"I bet I can name all the cities you played for."

"Calling them 'cities' would be an exaggeration," Joe said with a smirk. The eleven year stretch between us removed all opportunities for sibling rivalry, and my brother always looked on me with this mixture of pride and confusion, as if he wasn't quite sure how I got there. He never mentioned our mama, and I wondered what it was like for him, having me to take care of instead of Mama, taking care of him.

"Ok, towns then." My dad had played in the minor leagues for seven years, and I kept a map on my bedroom walls with all the towns he played in starred in gold and all the places where I'd seen a ballgame circled in red. "Topeka, Kansas; Sugarland, Texas; Ames, Iowa; and Richmond, Virginia."

"One more."

Of course," I said. "I was saving that one for last. Greyfield, Maine."

"Your mom's hometown."

"Dad, we're going to be back by next Thursday, right?" Joe sighed, shifting his legs so they took up the whole backseat floor. At his height, he probably should have been sitting beside my dad in the front, but there was more room to stretch out in the back, particularly since I folded my legs beneath me, Indian-style, giving him all the room he could ever want.

"Who knows?" My dad's voice was expansive, and he played with the radio, giving up on the static-driven voices when he couldn't find a grapefruit league, a cactus league game. "Maybe we should stay down here through spring training, wait out the winter away from all that cold, all that snow."

"Can we, daddy? Please?" I dreamed of long days at the ballpark, feeling the sun on my skin as the players shifted around the diamond, cool nights under stadium lights, my school bag forgotten in the backseat of the station wagon.

"We've got to go back, Dad," Joe sighed. "I have to go to school. If I don't, I can't play baseball, not for the school or the town."

The logic was cleverly chosen; the lure of his son's potential baseball career was the only evidence Dad would accept. As much as I pouted, our trips were always too short, and we were always back in New England, back in the cold classrooms where I'd missed too much to want to keep up, pulled away from the wide stretches of desert, in Florida, in Arizona, even in Mexico, with the men who played the sport year round.

Opening Day always took place in front of the television set, with cablevision, then the giant satellite dish installed in front of our house, dictating which games we'd watch. For years, baseball began with the Reds, Cincinnati the city lucky enough to shake off the long cool winter and welcome back the boys of summer – prematurely, perhaps, as I could always see the players' breath illuminated against the freezing April evening air.

Our first actual game of the year was always Patriots Day, always a day game, a home game, for the Boston Red Sox, the major league team closest in distance from our tiny Maine town.

"What's your favorite team," I once asked my father.

"All of them." His answer was quick.

"No, really. Pick one."

"Just one?"

"Yes. And it has to be real, and it has to be a major league team. You can't say Joe's American Legion one."

"Hmmm, that's a tough question. I was born in Boston, so I guess I'd have to say the Red Sox."

"But they never win anything."

"Someday they will."

"Someday" I thought would be 1986, the first (and only) year I was caught up in the magic of the Red Sox, the one year where everyone in our town had tuned their radio to the crackling Massachusetts station, listening to the Tigers, the Orioles, the Blue

Jays, the Yankees go down, team by team, as the Sox marched their way to the pennant. For one brief summer, everyone around us was just like my family: reenacting great plays by Barrett and Gedman, praising the incredible bats of Boggs and Rice, and stunned by the talent of Clemens, the greatest pitcher to wear a Sox uniform in six decades. I thought it'd be exciting to be caught up in a World Championship team. I was wrong, we were all wrong, and "someday" once more was elusive for the residents of Red Sox Nation.

I wore a Cubs hat to Fenway Park on Patriots Day, 1987. I don't know why I decided on the Cubs; perhaps their location in the city where my idol once played was what inspired my loyalty (I could never be a White Sox fan – not after what Comiskey did to Shoeless Joe). It was early morning when we arrived in Boston, before the morning rush hour traffic, the sun rising over the Mystic River and glinting off the dull green and blue steel of the bridges connecting the city to solid land. Joe was sleeping beside me; my brother could sleep anywhere, on our front porch, in dugouts, cramped into the backseat of the station wagon as we barreled through the narrow streets of Boston, potholes and poorly paved stretches jostling the cracked white leather beneath us. We got to Fenway early, and my father pulled out his maps, plotting out the winding route that'd take us from Maine to California, hitting as many of the twenty-six major league ballparks as possible.

"We can't go this year, Daddy," I whined, hanging on the seat between us. "Joe's team is going to make the playoffs, and we'll have games all summer."

"I know, kiddo," he sighed. "Maybe next year."

We ate greasy breakfasts two blocks away from Fenway Park, and watched the city come to life outside the window, women in grey skirts and sneakers hurrying toward the train stop across the street, businessmen purchasing newspapers from the grizzly old guys on the corner hawking the Marathon special edition, baseball fans streaming up Brookline Avenue for the morning game. We stood in the crowd with them, outside the gates of Fenway, until the doors opened, surging us forward through the ancient turnstiles, painted a fresh green for the new season. From the brick façade hung a new banner, proclaiming the Red Sox 1986 American League Champions, but the crowd around me grumbled about the lack of another World Series banner.

The game was instantly forgettable – the lowly Indians jumped to a quick 6-0 lead, and the Sox cycled out seemingly dozens of pitchers. Boston in April is usually still winter, but the sun that day was bright, and the air felt like spring, perfect running conditions for the twenty thousand people streaming into the city down Commonwealth Avenue taking part in the Boston Marathon. In usual circumstances, the 11 o'clock Patriots Day Sox game is timed to end just as the first runners hit Kenmore Square, giving baseball fans the opportunity to see two victories within a span of a few moments. In a game that stretched well past normal playing time – Cleveland has scored 23 runs by the eighth inning, with Boston adding nine of their own – the stands emptied out long before the game was over, fans giving up on the hometown boys, hoping to cheer the premier runners toward the finish line instead.

We stayed to the end, of course. Having been cured of any affection for the Red Sox, I cheered for players – Cleveland and Boston – and basked in the run production,

begging my dad to let me take over at keeping score. He finally handed over his wide black book, a record of every game he attended, from Joe's high school match-ups to the ones in Fenway Park, boxes carefully drawn during the off-season, waiting to be filled in with his block letters and numbers, the solid straight lines. My favorites were the strikeouts, big capital Ks, and I loved completing the diamonds. I added my own penmanship, attempting to make my pencil marks as small and perfect as his, but they were still giant, messy in comparison as I recorded the twenty-fourth run.

Beside me, Joe slung his legs over the empty seat in front of him, slouching down in the green metal seat and pulling his cap over his eyes. "Wake me when it's over," he said.

Free of the scorebook, my dad relaxed on the other side of me, munching a hot dog and pointing to the electronic scoreboard over right field. "You can follow that one," he said, motioning with the remainder of his bun and mustard to the photograph of Joe Carter flashing large above the bleacher seats. "Or that one." He gestured to the Green Monster, which housed a giant blackboard where the scores were manually changed, run by run. "Either one will tell you the same thing."

In the battle between my father and my brother, it's difficult to say who won round one. My brother was not drafted by the Los Angeles Dodgers; instead, he was selected two picks earlier, by the Texas Rangers. He also had a full scholarship to play baseball for the University of Florida. On a bright May morning as I fumbled with my braids, trying to make them plait evenly like all the other girls in my class who had

mothers to brush their hair, my brother laid down his terms: he'd accept the Rangers' offer, but only if they'd let him begin his pre-law degree at Duke University. That meant no spring training, no fall ball, no majors until he was done with school.

"I don't get it," my dad said, his head in his hands as he sat at grandfather's old desk which served as our kitchen table. "Why would you want to study, when you can play baseball?"

"I'm not like you," Joe said calmly, but he could have shouted it, could have shot it straight into our father's gut for all the effect those words had on him, on me. I didn't get it, either. School was merely one long stretch between sleep and the afternoon game, and I couldn't understand what all those numbers, all those letters had to do with real life.

Real life. That was something Joe had been saying for awhile, as if it were an entirely different existence than the one we experienced now, while Dad cut articles out of newspapers and I glued my brother's achievements into the blue scrapbook I won at a birthday party and carried in my book bag every morning.

"You have a gift – a talent! How can you turn your back on this chance, this opportunity that any boy, any man, would kill for?"

"I can't live your dreams, I can't make up for your mistakes." The calmer and more balanced my brother's voice stayed, the louder and more agitated my father's became.

"Why rush this school thing? You can study later –"

"I want to go to college now."

I left my cereal bowl and ran outside to the front porch. I crouched down under the swing, their voices muffled but still reaching me, continuing even without their audience, their unwilling fan. I flipped open my scrapbook, my fingers tracing the smudged black and white newspaper print, the blurry images of my brother at the plate, in the field, posing before and after games with his too-big grin, his thick dark hair pushed back across his forehead with the back of his hand, the brim of his hat.

“Shoeless Joe Joseph Jefferson Jackson,” I chanted, the pages flipping beneath my hands, my brother’s face passing quickly, running into the letters and numbers of his accomplishments. “Born, July 16, 1887, Brandon Mills, South Carolina. Died, December 5, 1951, Greenville, South Carolina. World Series, 1919, twelve hits, no errors, .375 batting average. Lifetime average, .356, third highest in the history of baseball. He had a bat named Black Betsy, and his glove was known as the place where triples went to die.”

My voice became louder, and the pages flipped rapidly, until I reached the empty ones, waiting for future games, feats that had not yet happened, to be chronicled, trimmed, then pasted inside. Blank pages flew by, and I started again, the turning of the paper and my voice drowning out the sounds coming from inside the house. “Shoeless Joe Jackson,” I repeated. “Joseph Jefferson Jackson Carlyle. Born, Greyfield, Maine, 1970.”

“Shoeless Joe Jackson. Joe Carlyle.”

Six years. It took six years for my brother to make it to the Show, living the double life of his, playing baseball by day, studying by night, or vice versa – I wasn't there most of the time, so I don't know the details. My father was stubborn, but Joe was just as stubborn, and he had his degree in hand before he'd ever played a game above Triple A, even though he was said have more natural talent than any other player drafted that year, was stronger, bigger, able to play, just not committed enough to put in the same time everyone around him did.

During those six years, my father became more involved in his mythical world of baseball than ever. He stopped coaching the Little League teams, stopped scouting for Greyfield High and running reunions for the Catfish, the last minor league team he'd played for and the last paycheck he'd ever collected, he'd proudly state. Instead, my father focused on becoming a full-time fan. The profits from grandfather's company, run now by a distant cousin, paid for the car trips and hotel rooms near my brother's minor league games; an accountant down in Boston took care of the more minor inconveniences like our heat and electricity.

One summer weekend, we drove the wagon out of Greyfield, down the Maine turnpike and onto 95 South. I sat in the front seat, crossing my ankles on top of the dash and reading the box scores out loud to my father as he fiddled with the Boston talk radio stations.

"Maddox threw a two-hitter last night," I said. "He's on pace for twenty games this year. Cy Young, you think?"

“His teammate could give him a run for his money,” my dad said, giving up on the static as we wound through traffic just outside Providence. “Glavine pitched a beaut against the Reds Thursday.”

Just then, the station wagon’s speed began to plummet, knocking me back into the worn leather where my mother once sat, and my father swerved us over to the wide grassy patch beside the road as the car stalled, then died. The wagon had taken us everywhere, to baseball games on both sides of the country and a million small towns in between, had been a new car back when my parents wore that name for the first time, my brother, just a baby, tucked into the backseat when the leather was shiny and new, sparkling white, the exterior dark blue and solid, not dinged and faded like I’ve always known.

The car was dead. We left it in a junk yard in Warwick, Rhode Island, and my dad hastily purchased another one, but we did not make it to South Carolina until well past the start of Joe’s game. At the ballpark, we joined a couple hundred other fans clumped together on wide metal bleachers in the rickety old stadium, reaching forward for the seventh inning stretch. We eagerly grabbed a scorecard and tried to figure out Joe’s spot in the lineup. But the game was a blowout, and the starters had long been removed. The new centerfielder was a skinny kid from the Dominican Republic who didn’t get much playing time, thanks to my brother’s abilities.

After the game, the three of us stood on the field, on the edge of the worn, dusty diamond, the stadium lights shining down on us. My brother, still in his uniform, grey pants dusted with dirt and the team nickname embroidered in red across his chest,

mourned the passing of the wagon as I studied the signs behind him advertising businesses I'd never heard of. Bussy's Auto Parts. CinSouth Health Care. Richmond and Sons Bank.

"There's another one tomorrow." My brother shrugged off our late arrival, and I couldn't help but remember when my father and I had perfect attendance at his games, the countless number of times our station wagon trailed his team bus.

The next morning, the three of us had breakfast at a Waffle House off the highway. Dad stretched the maps of South Carolina across the table, pushing plates of hash browns out of his way, and plotted the route to Greenville.

It was late morning when we arrived at the small graveyard. I can't remember planning in advance, but we must have, it was too coincidental that we, a family built on Shoeless Joe, would not be aware this visit to his gravestone took place on his birthday. My brother had his ball cap on backwards that day, my arms were poking through a tank top, and my father's hair was almost completely faded to white; when I remember that day, I see the three of us, as if I'm hovering above watching us, Joe, me, my dad, standing in front of that gravestone, looking at the words as if they meant something more than a date of birth, a date of death, this strange sort of pilgrimage to the final resting place of a stranger, a man who died when my dad was barely ten years old.

Later, we took the highway that bore his name to the field where he'd once played ball, a washed up heavy circus freak of a man, performing in front of crowds gathered because of his infamy. It was then I realized I had just taken my first trip to a graveyard, any graveyard, and I didn't even know where my mother, a woman who

was as distant to me as Shoeless Joe Jackson – more distant, to tell the truth – was buried.

I was fifteen when my brother played his first game in the majors. The Rangers traded him to Chicago, and he was called up in late August, but he did not get an at-bat until mid-September, long after the White Sox had been eliminated from playoff contention. For two weeks, my dad and I trudged from our hotel in downtown Chicago to Comiskey Park, named for the man who drove Joe Jackson from the game of baseball, and waited for my brother to take the field, to step up to the batters box, but for two weeks, all we saw was his clean white uniform, pale and new in the dugout beside his teammates'. We sat among the die-hard Sox fans, the tourists, the mi-level executives finally enjoying the company tickets, and my dad pulled out his black score book, hopeful each day that would be the game he'd finally get to write down his son's name.

It finally happened during a Wednesday night game, a September wind pushing in off Lake Michigan chilling the summer air. We had seats on the third base line, a dozen rows back from the field, directly across from the Chicago dugout, and with my 20/20 eye sight I could watch my brother ride the pine all night long. My job was to study his profile for any signs of change; in the fifth inning, I reported he was pacing more than usual.

"Really?" My dad's voice was steady, surprising me with the way his words held their cadence. "This may be it, kiddo."

In the bottom of the sixth, Joe stepped from the dugout clutching a handful of bats, and I alerted our father, who raised his pen in anticipation above the scorecard. With grace and ease, my brother's arms stretched away from his body, executing a flawless practice swing. I leapt to my feet as his movements progressed with a painful slowness, as if in a stop-motion video, and I barely heard the fans behind me asking me to sit, or my father's reply, informing them of the importance of this moment. Soon everyone around us was standing, too, watching my brother prepare for his first at-bat.

"Joseph Carlyle" – the loud speaker sounded his name, leaving out the symbolic parts, but I'd read the Chicago newspapers, I knew this city made light of my brother's namesake, jokingly referred to the second coming of Shoeless Joe, leave the betting slips at home. For the reporters, it was a story. How could we explain, how could I explain, this was our life?

I glanced up at my father, still taller than me, taller than I'd ever be, the height gene settling exclusively upon my brother and skipping me entirely. His eyes were focused ahead, on his son, but instead of the unabashed joy I'd always imagined I'd see, there was something different, something hollow, something empty, something lost.

As he dropped the superfluous bats then strode into the on-deck circle, my brother was the most powerful man in the entire world, strong, invincible, standing at the cusp of an incredible career, and yet, I could barely recognize him, couldn't find the boy who taught me how to read, the teenager who fought to go to college inside that shell.

From home plate, he looked up at me – I swear he looked up at me, and saw the horror in my eyes, the eyes of a girl who'd missed more school than any child should, a girl a thousand miles away from where she belonged, watching the brother she'd always worshipped but never understood molded on the failures of his father, and his mouth twitched upward, as if to say, "It's OK."

"You see that," my dad said to no one, to everyone in Comiskey Park that night as my brother hit a meaningless pitch from another September call-up over the right field wall. "That's my son."

My brother wore so many uniforms throughout my life, played in so many games, it's hard to pick them out, label them as one or the other. The details all blur together, games, innings, folding into one another, baseball being, essentially, the same game, day in, day out, tiny miracles occurring all the time, some of coming from the pocket of my brother's glove, some flying from the end of his bat. I can't tell you why I remember the ones I do, or why his first American Legion game under the lights in Catfish Stadium makes more of an impression in my mind than the one he went 4-for-6 with eight RBIs against the Detroit Tigers eleven years later. I know that my father was wearing the worn blue Catfish hat from his last year in the minors, that my hair was in messy pigtails, that the mayor's wife, across from us behind home plate, was wearing a dress with green flowers running across it, and she was the only person in the ballpark not wearing a tee-shirt, shorts or jeans. I see the field, checked and vast, the diamond in the center of it, somehow sharper, larger, under the electric glow of the lights than it

ever was in daytime, the boys on both sides of it standing perfect and straight. Maybe because at the age of five, I had fewer memories to hold onto, fewer games in my mind, and that one molded itself into a space marked Important, one separate from all others.

All I know is that somehow, something began when my brother dressed in his brand new uniform, stood unremarkable with his team along the first base line before the game began, and then three innings later, hit a monstrous, towering home run right into the exact spot on the brand-new beams that would disable the entire system on the first – and last – day Greyfield ever had lights at the ballpark.

The Second Inning: Curveball

I was eighteen years old when I caught my first curveball.

I had been a baseball fan since my eighth birthday, when my twin brother Jason and I unwrapped matching leather gloves. Under the tutelage of our dad, we rubbed them with oil and stuffed them into old pillowcases, placing them under our mattresses at night. Each morning, we'd quickly open them, hoping they'd look as worn as the mitts worn by the Mets players, who we watched on television every night. We'd form a triangle in the backyard with our father each evening after work, tossing the ball back and forth. This obsession with playing baseball lasted exactly one summer; Jason would purposely overthrow to me, and I'd spend more time running after errant baseballs than anything else. My dad always insisted we master throwing and catching before moving onto batting, and the repetitiousness of the back and forth, combined with my brother's stronger arm, were what eventually drove me from actual participation in the sport before reaching step two.

As we moved from our backyard to the field down the street, I was voluntarily demoted to ball girl instead of active student of the game, which meant I was free to

play on the swings as my dad demonstrated the proper way to hold a bat. The park was almost always empty; there weren't many kids in our neighborhood, so it took me by surprise when a blond headed boy, who I recognized from third grade homeroom, walked over to me while my dad pitched to Jason and said, "Do you think I can I play, too?"

"Sure," I said quickly. "You can even use my glove."

That day marked the end of my participation in the McArdle family games of catch, but my adoration of the game continued to grow: I was the one keeping score at my brother's games, sitting beside my father and soaking in his running commentary about pitch selection and the beauty of the six-four-three double play, absorbing his knowledge like a favorite pupil and not the talentless daughter.

On a summer morning in late June, I savored my ability to stretch out in the sunlight with no reason or intent to leave my room. I slept late, or at least late for me; prior to that summer, I had been jarred awake at six o'clock by my brother's noisy descent toward his paper route, and later, football practice. I took great pleasure in waking to silence, his voice not echoing through the bathroom wall we shared, his sneakers not pounding on the hardwood steps. Jason still woke at dawn every day, but he descended the back steps barefoot, and didn't bother to wash before his morning games of catch with Ryan Manning.

It was at least nine before I became aware to the sound of an old baseball slapping against tired leather. I was determined to ignore it until my brother's off-key voice belted up through my open window.

"But I know that he won't stay without Melissa."

"Don't quit your day job," I called down to my brother. I leaned halfway out the window, my arms wrapped around my tee-shirt as the brisk air hit my skin just as he got to the chorus, bellowing out the Allman Brothers song I was named for.

"Well, it's about time Sleeping Beauty showed her face," Jason smirked. "So what's your plan for the day? Slaying dragons? Turning princes into frogs?"

"I was planning to let down my long hair and wait for my knight in shining armor -- oh, wait. That's Rapunzel."

"Whoever you are, get on down here. You're missing a beautiful day."

I paused only to throw on a pair of shorts and to scoop my hair back into a knot before joining the boys in the backyard. I stretched out on the still-damp grass between them and breathed in the morning air. Jason was right; it was a gorgeous morning, one of those early summer days that held the promise of sunshine, of cool breezes and a bright golden sky. The perfect weather to do nothing, which is what I had planned for that day, and for many more to follow.

"Good morning, Melissa." Ryan paused mid-pitch, turning toward me with a half-smile.

Ryan had been selected in the fifteenth round of the major league draft, and talking to him about the Colorado organization that he'd be joining seemed like a safe place to start a conversation.

"So have the Rockies given you your assignment yet?"

Ryan put down his glove, and sat next to me. "They called me last night – they're sending me to their rookie league down in Carolina, which is pretty much what I expected. This time next week, I'll be an Asheville Tourist."

"The Tourists? That's a silly name for a baseball team."

"All the cool names were taken a hundred years ago," Jason said. "It could be worse -- he could be a Wisconsin Timber Rattler or a Lansing Lugnut."

My brother dropped his glove on the ground, and started walking toward the house. "I'm gonna go grab a sandwich. You two behave yourselves."

I looked quickly at Ryan, but he shook his head with the slightest motion. After the screen door closed shut, he said quietly, "He doesn't know."

I had my doubts. It seemed improbable I could keep something from my brother, and impossible that Ryan could. Jason had been reading our minds and finishing our thoughts for as long as either of us could remember. It had always been the three of us, with Ryan and Jason as the core, and me tagged on by virtue of blood. If any of us were ever left out, I would be the most likely candidate, with Ryan a distant second. It was unbelievable anything could occur involving more than one of us and Jason would not know about it.

But it appeared that something had.

"So, are you ready to leave?"

Ryan shrugged his shoulders, stretching his long arms back behind him. "Ready as I'll ever be. I mean, it's amazing, on one hand I can't believe it's happening to me, but

on the other, I can't imagine pitching a single inning without your brother standing behind me."

"Jason will be OK," I said automatically. "It's better for shortstops to go to college."

"I'm not worried about him," Ryan shook his head. "Jay and I are different. Your brother will do fine, whatever he does. Me? This doesn't pan out, there's nothing else."

I raised my eyebrows, but what he said made sense. My brother's dreams of playing professional sports were just that -- dreams. When the two of them were younger, my brother was the one with the promise, who had what all his coaches called a natural talent for the game. As a freshman, he was starting shortstop for the varsity squad, while Ryan struggled to make the team. But that following summer, Ryan grew six inches and spent every day in my backyard practicing his pitching, and his skills soon passed those of my brother's.

Jason took this development the way he did everything, with a shrug and smile. My brother would be equally happy finding a job as a scout or high school coach, eventually working up to athletic director. But when the two of them talked about it, the hard look in Ryan's eyes betrayed exactly how he felt.

Not that I didn't believe he would change. "You're 18 years old. You have this offer, so of course you think this is the only thing you can do. But it's not like you have to decide what you want to do for the rest your life right now. Look at me, I haven't even figured out what I want to study in college."

He *was* looking at me, even though I hadn't meant it literally. His eyes focused on my face as I talked, and I felt the redness creep up my cheeks at the intensity of his attention. He rose suddenly, picking Jason's glove up from where my brother had tossed it moments ago.

"Here," he said, throwing the glove at me. "Let me pitch to you."

I slipped my hand into the worn leather, surprised at how soft it felt. It had been years since I'd worn a baseball glove, and the one from my childhood remained stiff and new. I gave up playing long before it ever became broken in, but I remembered how much I wanted it to feel just like the one in my hands. Jason must have been through dozens of gloves since we were eight, and I only had that one single glove, tucked into the back of my closet.

As I squatted down in the earth, the idea of having a real live minor league prospect pitch to me was an appealing one. Taking part in what had been Ryan and Jason's secret world thrilled me for a moment -- but only a moment. I was struck with visions of one of Ryan's pitches gone awry and the Harwood emergency ward; I began to calculate how fast it would take a black eye to heal.

"You promise not to kill me?"

"What, knock off Roger McCardle's only daughter? You think I have a death wish? Come on, I won't give you any heat, just a curveball."

He followed me over to the back of the house, and put his hand on my shoulder, guiding me into a squatting position on the ground. His fingers stayed on my bare arm just a moment too long, and he pulled it away quickly, as if my skin were hot to touch.

"So have you heard from Cliff?"

The last thing I expected Ryan to do was ask me about my prom date.

"Not since that night," I shrugged. "Should I be offended that he didn't even bother to say goodbye to me?"

"He was probably too embarrassed," Ryan answered. "You know, he really liked you."

"Anyway, let's play ball." I found myself starting to blush again, and immediately began fiddling with the glove on my hand.

For months, Ryan and Jason made teasing remarks about Cliff's apparent devotion to me, which I found hard to believe. Cliff was the second baseman, the four in the six-four-three combination, and he was perhaps the quietest of their friends. He'd never spoken one word to me, until the day he asked me to the prom.

Everything about our senior year of high school had been a letdown: college applications, the yearbook, graduation, and especially the prom. I don't know why I believed four years of monotony would end in a spectacular way, but senior year was just like every other year, just with more parties.

Prom was the worst. I had a date, I had a dress, I even had an orchid wrist corsage. But underneath the decorations, it was still the same gym where Ryan and Jason won the basketball conference championship; underneath the tuxes and gowns, we were still the same kids who had gone to school together for the past four years.

Instead of being magical, the night was vaguely depressing, and I was only relieved the night was over as I sank into the back seat of the stretch Bentley the boys

had rented. Cliff was nice enough, but it was an awkward evening, especially since his teammates behaved exactly the way I thought they would. Having one older brother, with “older” in our case being defined as three minutes, along on a date is bad enough. But with Ryan there, too, the obnoxious jabs didn’t stop.

“Do you mind dropping me off first? I’m kind of tired,” I asked Cliff, as the boys and their dates hopped in behind us.

“Are you kidding? We’re all going back to your place. Jay said your parents are up at their cabin this weekend, and he’s invited a few friends over.”

A “few friends” as defined by Jason could mean hundreds, and the last thing I wanted was a house full of people. Fortunately, I wasn’t the only one Jason forgot to tell about the gathering, and only about a dozen of our classmates showed up. This meant spending more time with Cliff than I had planned, however, and I resigned myself to an evening of stilted conversation.

Partially out of pity, and partially because he was my brother’s friend, I tried very hard to come up with interesting things to say to him once we got back to my house. Fortunately, I didn’t have to try for too long: within an hour, Cliff was passed out on our living room couch, and I was free.

“Just squat down, low, like this, and keep the glove steady.” Ryan guided my hand, positioning it so the glove was in front of me. “Most catchers believe the curveball is one of the hardest pitches to field, but I’m going to make it easy for you.”

I pushed the hair out of my face, and dug my bare toes into the patches of grass, worn almost to dirt by my brother, who had crouched for years in this very same position. "You would give me a hard one," I said, glancing up at him.

"All you have to do," he replied, "Is keep the glove steady. It's going to look like the ball is going somewhere completely different, but I promise you, it will end up exactly in your mitt, as long as you don't move it."

I sat by Cliff for a moment, watching him snore. If he woke up, I should be there, I first thought. Then I decided I didn't care, and escaped to our backyard.

Right away, I noticed the dark form perched on the edge of the picnic table. Instead of joining him, I sank down on the makeshift pitcher's mound and watched him, waiting for him to speak. He was still wearing his tuxedo, but his shoes were off, and he seemed to have lost his tie. His hair, which had been neatly groomed just hours before, was sticking up in various places; how strange it was to see him without a baseball hat on his head. He looked like a different person than the one I'd known half my life.

He had to have noticed he was no longer alone, but the silence stretched between us, for ten, maybe fifteen minutes.

"Too many people in there?" When he finally spoke, it was that simple, turning to me as if this was a completely natural moment, the two of us alone, outside, in the middle of the night.

I shrugged, and got up off the ground, noticing the grass stains on the back of my skirt. It wasn't as if I'd ever have an occasion to wear it again, but I brushed it off as much as I could anyway.

"Here, let me help you," Ryan held out an unsteady arm, and I walked over to him, close enough for his fingers to touch the ridiculously stiff fabric of my dress. "Jay's the one who likes the crowds. He's the original center of attention boy. It's not by accident you're always on one side of him, and me on the other."

I was vaguely uncomfortable with this assessment of my brother. Not because it wasn't true; I'd known for years Jason thrived off a crowd. But to hear it from the mouth of his best friend unsettled me. I sat down beside him on the picnic table, and clutched my hands around my beer instead of answering.

"But you and I -- we aren't that way. Why else would we be sitting alone in the dark?"

I shook my head. "I can't think of a reason."

"It's like this," Ryan leaned back on his forearms. "You think you know someone, you think you know what it is you have in your life. But then one night, you start to look at things a little bit different. It's like life throws you a pitch that you didn't expect, and you start to regret things you never would have. And you realize there's a McArdle you're going to have regrets about when you leave this place, and it sure as hell isn't Jason."

Ryan walked backward, maybe fifty feet away from me, to the pitcher's mound he and Jason had built years ago, effectively staking their claim in this space, making our backyard practically unsuitable for any other occasion. He pulled his cap over his eyes and shot me his pitcher's glare, which made me giggle.

"You're supposed to be intimidated by that look, not amused," he admonished.

"Save it for the big guys," I replied.

He stepped into his stance, turning his body sideways, holding the ball in his left hand. "Now remember," he said. "Whatever you do, don't move the glove."

My father often said that watching Ryan pitch was like witnessing a painter complete a masterpiece. I sat through endless games, studied the way his arm crossed his body a countless number of times, but never saw what my dad did, until that morning. I don't know if it was because I was on the receiving end of one of his pitches, or because of what he said to me two weeks before, but for the first time I saw the beauty and not just the power of Ryan's pitching.

Without taking his eyes off my glove, his right leg came up and then lowered as the left side of his body moved forward. The ball came spinning toward me, and I fought all instincts to jolt my hand up another ten inches to what appeared to be the destination of the ball. But I repeated to myself what Ryan had said and kept still. At the last moment, the rotating orb began to fall, as if an invisible force pushed it downward, and it landed firmly with a pop right in the middle of my brother's glove.

I didn't look at Ryan as he talked. I didn't want to see if he were joking, just trying to rile me up again like he'd been doing all night; nor did I want confirmation of the truth behind his intentions, didn't want his face, his eyes to tell me he meant the words that kept pouring from his mouth, about me, and him, words I tried not to hear, words lost to me immediately in the exhaustion of that night, the fizzles of the end of high school, tempered by this spark of something unexpected happening in my own backyard.

I clearly remember what happened next, however, in almost painful detail. Ryan, who for years and years was my second brother, leaned over and put his left hand on my shoulder, his right hand on my face, and kissed me.

It was just that -- a stupid kiss, and I'd been kissed enough times in the past to know that they rarely mean anything. But this one, this kiss from Ryan of all people, was not meaningless. It was exactly the opposite.

Everything felt different. Everything was changed. The balance I'd lived with for as long as I could remember had shifted. And I did the only thing I could. I pulled away and ran into the house, up the stairs past all those people, and shut my bedroom door behind me.

"Excellent job." Jason stood behind me, a sandwich in his hand. "You should have come out and done this years ago. You would have saved my knees a lot of pain."

My hand stung slightly from the impact, and I slipped it out of the glove, shaking it while trying not to wince.

"How did you do that?" I asked Ryan, tossing him back the worn baseball.

The three of us stood together, Jason in the center, Ryan and I on either side of him. We wouldn't be this way for much longer. Ryan would be leaving to begin his baseball career, Jason and I would be at college soon. I wanted something to happen, I wanted closure, but all I got from Ryan was an answer to my question.

"It's all in the way you hold the ball. It's the greatest trick a pitcher has -- you make it look like its going to do one thing, and then it does something completely different."

The Third Inning: Rainout

I stand on the mound, my hair wet and knotted and stuck to my skin. The rain is light, and the sky still blue behind the drops. Here, in this part of the South, they call them sunshowers, and they are frequent. Once or twice a week the heavens remain bright while moisture pours down, lasting minutes at a time.

My arms and shoulders are bare, again. The Virginia summer came early this year, and the rain has done nothing to diminish the heat. Today is Friday, my free day, and I spent it sweating in my small apartment before the clouds opened up, drenching the empty field with prisms of light. I slip off my sandals before walking onto the diamond, preferring to feel the earth directly on my skin. Beneath my bare feet the mound is firm, not fully damp, still dirt and not yet mud. I dig my toes in, and recall my childhood. Mudpies, or days at the beach: I imagine that this is what it would have felt like to be young and without worries, safe and at one with nature, if I had had one of those childhoods. But I didn't, and the memories must be invented. A bright blue pail, a yellow swimsuit, overalls with faded sunspots and worn patches. A red boat, a green

frog. These are the items I imagine I would have treasured as a young girl, savoring the ocean and the woods. A lucky combination.

I am used to the rain pouring down my face, but it still feels new, uninvited, and I resist the urge to wipe the water from my eyes. Instead, I hold out my hands, catching the drops in my palms. I concentrate on the rivers on my thighs, the wetness of my shorts.

This, for me, is foreplay.

On Wednesday, Justin took his place in this exact spot, striding to the mound shortly after one o'clock, dressed in his polyester white and blue uniform and spiked cleats. I sat in the stands, my bare legs pressed against the metal bleachers and an open score book resting on top of my thighs, just as I did for every home game played by the college baseball team.

"Hannah, did you know that opposing batters hit only .143 against Justin with runners on base?" Tricia Davidson, mother of the leftfielder, tapped me from behind. "If you factor out the first inning, he has the best average in the conference."

Tricia was one of the many mothers who came from all over the East Coast to watch their sons play ball. She loved numbers, and arrived at every game with her long brown hair clipped back to deliver a bit of crunched magic that made the team sound better than they really were. The other mothers and I took solace in Tricia's numbers, however, and often lamented the fact that they couldn't be transformed into more wins.

“Justin looks fine, like he’s settled down,” Catey Robinson pointed out in her Southern drawl. “He’s got good form today – he’s not slumping over, like he did against State.”

“Thanks, Catey,” I said to her. Catey brought me catalog pictures of dresses I could wear to spring formal, offered to braid my hair, and carried extra cans of my favorite soda in her tote bag. I always tried to sit close to her. She and Tricia were among the local mothers, if you considered West Virginia and Maryland and North Carolina local. I did. To me, the East Coast was one big neighborhood, states crowded and bumping into one another. It always amazed me that places so close together could have so many different accents.

“I bet he’ll get a win,” Alice Banks said from the other side of me, her green eyes dancing.

“Thanks to your son,” I told her. Fred Banks had snared a line-drive in the third inning that would have guaranteed extra bases, and the relief was clear on Justin’s face - - but only momentarily, and perhaps only to me.

This is how I spend my spring afternoons: sitting under the warm Virginia sun with women as old as my grandmother, studying the sons they had raised so carefully as their crisp white uniforms grow gray with dust and dirt. These are women who dated and married and had children in that order, and not in reverse, like the women in my own family.

I left Colorado behind shortly before my eighteenth birthday, and the money I inherited from my maternal predecessors (much more generous in death than they ever

were in life) allowed me to attend a college as far away from the stench of my childhood and the cold fear of my adolescence as I could get. I selected my school because of its proximity to both the woods and ocean, in the shaded spot of Virginia not far from the shores of the Chesapeake Bay. This campus fit my imagination perfectly: big sprawling buildings, coffeehouses that stayed open all night, patches of benches surrounded by ancient leafy trees.

I live one mile away from the center of campus, in a spacious one-bedroom apartment filled with the discarded coffee tables and overstuffed chairs of other families – Southern families, ones with many children, or at least clumsy ones, judging by the stains and nicks. I've named each spill, each chip; from my brass queen bed, I've told Justin about the time my oldest brother Philip banged his chin on the mahogany table, prompting seven stitches, and the oversized glass of cranberry juice that my second brother Robert knocked onto the cream upholstered chair.

The apartment also has a big window seat, and I discovered during my first spring in Virginia that it overlooked the college baseball field. I curled my knees up under me one afternoon, and watched, breathless, as the nine not-quite-men in their clean white uniforms lined up on the field, taking their positions with a seriousness that bordered on grace. Immediately, something about the symmetry of the game moved me. I was curious enough to venture outdoors, first standing behind the outfield fence, then finally moving toward the bleachers, where not a single one of my classmates sat. I later learned the distance from campus, plus the mediocre record of the team, proved to be too much of a challenge for other students. Instead, the stands were populated with

women: women in summer dresses and jeans and business suits, with purses and briefcases and bestsellers beside them, women who would become my heroes, my idols, my goddesses of the diamond over the next three years.

For the length of my collegiate career, I'd sat among them, absorbing their stories into my skin. They were perfect: Tricia with her neat lined notebook of statistics, Catey always talking about the exploits of her four boys, Alice providing inning by inning recaps, our own makeshift announcer. They took to me almost instantly, recognizing me as a kindred soul, one of their own. They fed me their stories, and I, in turn, gave them my own: a devoted sister watching her brothers play baseball alongside a cheering mother. These were lies, of course. I had no brothers, and certainly if I did, they wouldn't have played organized sports. But my imagined siblings were stars on the ball field; they started for the state's select teams, and I followed them from county to county as they competed against boys who were later drafted by the Minnesota Twins and the Chicago Cubs.

"Hannah, I heard from Justin's parents last week," Alice tapped me on the shoulder. "It's too bad they can't make it out from Palo Alto for more of his games. I told him they have a terrific surrogate in the stands with us, however. He is so lucky to have a girlfriend like you."

"Thanks." I smiled at her, turning my attention back to the mound.

As Justin pitched, the mothers' voices blended together to form one sound in my ears, omniscient and wise. They knew the nuances of the game, and spoke of batting averages and home field advantages the way that the woman they replaced talked of

men and heroin. I trusted them, believed in their words of assurance and praise and instinctual kindness. They had watched their sons play since Little League, and I believed they knew everything.

I don't hear Justin behind me. I'm too in touch with the rain or it is pounding on the grass too loud or he has mastered the art of guerrilla tactics. At a bulky six-foot-five, the only way he'd surprise anyone is by approaching soundlessly. I know his smell, I know his taste, I know how his skin feels beneath my palms. His sound is the one sense I have yet to conquer, and as he comes at me from behind, there is no way for me to know he has joined me until his wrists are around my shoulders.

This is why I've worn a tank top. His wet hands are on my wet skin instantly and I spin around to face him, straining all the way up on the tips of my toes to knock the baseball cap off of his head and lift my mouth to his. His last win on this field still lingers in the dirt beneath our feet. I imagine I can taste the remnants from that game on his breath, the slightly bitter tang of leftover adrenaline still pulsing through his body, the ancient maleness of hard battles fought and won.

"What would you do," Justin says in my ear, "if I didn't show up? Would you stand here in the rain by yourself? How long?"

I slide my teeth around the soft part of his ear, biting gently. "That wouldn't happen," I tell him with my tongue. "You see the rain, you come here. It's that simple."

“Han, there’s nothing simple about it.”

“Right.” I trace my fingers across his wet shirt, feeling the tight muscles in his back. My feet are muddy now, and I’ve managed to create dark rivers on his legs with my toes.

“I want you to think about that.” His voice is low next to my throat. “I want you to think about what would happen if I left you here alone.”

I brush off his attempt at cruelty with a smile. I’m the one in control in this situation, and we both know that. I don’t let him play at commands or position me as the helpless female. I don’t need him, I tell him. He has enough people who need him. I could walk away from this right now, without a word, and not even look back at him, standing alone and wet on the mound in the center of the baseball diamond. My role is one of destruction. I tear things down with my teeth.

I feel my ancestral blood surging through my veins, the secret history I’ve kept locked up inside released by Justin’s mouth. I press it down as much as I can, ignoring the words that came to me so recently, words that tie us to the woman who should have planned beach days and picnics, but never did.

Instead, I concentrate on the woman I have created, the woman Justin needs me to be. I am on his level, I can say the things to him that no one else will say. I am the harsh one, but it’s a firmness he needs to hear. Adoration he finds elsewhere; with me, the water that runs between us is tempered with flames. In return, he doesn’t have to protect me.

I don't ask for more than the game of baseball and the touch of his pitch-callused hands on my bare skin.

He's the one who is always asking for more, and he knows it.

The mothers grew quiet in the bottom of the sixth, and I knew why. Justin had yet to give up a single hit, a single walk, a single base to any of the opposing batters. When he strode to the mound as his team made their last out, none of the women spoke. It's bad luck to mention a no-hitter after the seventh inning has commenced.

Catey grabbed my hand briefly, murmuring under her breath, "This is so exciting." In the three years I'd been watching the team play baseball, not a single one of our pitchers had achieved a no-hitter, never mind a perfect game.

Tricia looked up from her scorebook. "Han, your brother threw a no hitter, right?"

"Yes, that's right. My second brother, Robert, in a high school game against our state rivals." The words flowed easily off my tongue, and I knew if I told this story often enough, it would be true.

I turned my attention back to the game, where Justin was getting ready for his next pitch. His dark bangs were plastered to his face under the brim of his navy blue cap, the warm sun and his body's sweat conspiring against him. He brushed his hair back with his left forearm, his right hand holding the limp cap loosely. With his height

and his frame, Justin was an imposing force on the mound, and he used it to his full advantage. His dark eyes challenged each batter, the corners of his mouth turned down in concentration. I often teased him that he must rehearse his glare in front of the mirror; it was too pat, too Hollywood to be anything but a well-practiced disguise.

The batter, the other team's second baseman, was almost a foot shorter than Justin, and although he appeared to brush off the pitcher's looks with a few practice swings of his bat, his stance betrayed his fear. A heater, low and inside, sent him sprawling backwards, stumbling toward the dirt beside the batter's box. This is my plate, Justin said with that pitch. It took only three more to send the batter back to his dugout, the bat left behind with a disgusted slam.

"You must be so nervous," Alice said to me after the second out, a pop up to the first baseman. "Justin looks great out there. It's like he isn't even tired."

He wasn't. Justin is one of those rare pitchers who grow stronger as the afternoon wears on, and this game was no exception. After his trouble in the third inning, he breezed through the next batters, each strike relaxing him, boosting his confidence and building his aura of perfection.

Our team scored an insurance run in the bottom of the inning, giving Justin a 3-0 lead to work with as he took the mound once more. He was masterful, and his only mistake in the entire game occurred when he gave up a bloop single to right field, the team's weak spot defensively. A better outfielder would have made the catch, but Justin barely reacted to the hit. He shrugged it off, and later told me he attributed it to karma catching up with him for the great play made by Fred Banks earlier in the game. The

women around me let out a sigh, and were quick to offer condolences and encouragement.

“If he left the game right now, he would still have the best ERA on the team,” Tricia assured me.

“But no way would that happen,” Catey added. “Coach would be insane to pull him at this point.”

She was right; the team had nothing to worry about. Without showing any emotion, Justin struck out the next two batters to end the eighth, then pitched a one-two-three ninth.

The mothers endured a brief moment of disappointment before cheering for their sons, who flocked around Justin delivering sweaty hugs and slapping dirty palms. I watched the losing team slip quietly, almost unnoticed, off the field and toward their bus, which I hoped would carry them to hotel rooms with hot showers.

The mound was almost empty when I approached Justin, breaking off from the group of women descending toward the players. With his own family so far away, I was the one he turned to after games, while around us, mothers hugged their sons.

“Hey you.” He kissed me quickly, his mouth twisted into an almost boyish smile, so different from his pitcher’s glare. I wrapped my arms around his damp shirt, breathing in the smells of his sweat and the field and the game I loved.

“Great game,” I told him.

The mothers turned away from their sons to smile in approval.

“Do you remember the first time we did this?” Justin says to me as his mouth moves down my neck.

“No,” I tease him between kisses. “But I must have been crazy to be interested in such a cocky bastard.”

“It was my fastball that drew you toward me,” he tells me. “Do you remember the game? It was May third, and I was losing, 5-4.”

He loves to do this, tell me things I know. He calls me in the middle of the night with his memories of games, of the times we’ve spent on this mound or in my bed. He tells these stories to me, and he is the first person to take real pleasure from my presence. I pretend to only tolerate his versions, but in truth he gives me something more valuable than he’d ever believe possible: memories I can hold onto with both my hands, stories that are tangible and fresh and new, images to replace the ones I’ve invented, the ones made myself forget.

He talks about our first meeting like this: *It was May third, and I was losing, 5-4. I was on the mound at the top of the sixth inning when it began to rain – it felt like nothing, just drops, but there were soon puddles on the field. The game was called, and all my teammates and the other guys left the field – all except me. I couldn’t believe I was losing the game on a technicality, a light rainstorm. I watched the mothers pack up their books and umbrellas. The stands were empty, except for you. You – your hair stuck to your face in dark wet stands – you just sat there. Watching me.*

‘I would have won,’ I called up to you. ‘If only they’d let me finish.’

Someone else might have told me 'it's only a game' or some shit like that. But Hannah, you said nothing. You just came right up to me on that mound, stood up on your toes and kissed me.

He smiles down at me, lifting me off my feet. "Just like you are now," he tells me. "It's like nothing has changed between now and then – this could be that day."

But it wasn't that day; too much has happened since we first melded together in the rain. For one, I keep Justin away, never let him be more than the boy I kiss on this field or take to my bed. I set the rules for our relationship: when we see each other on campus or in one of the local bars, he is never to say more than the polite hello of acquaintances. Contrary to what the mothers may believe, I am not his girlfriend. In fact, that role is filled by someone else.

Justin has been with Emma Chaplian since freshman year, months before he met me. She is Kappa Kappa Gamma, a veterinary student who holds an internship with the horse doctor in town and spends every afternoon curing sick foals and easing the pain of maimed ponies. Animals are much more important than sports, she believes, and therefore, like most of our university, she has never seen a single one of her boyfriend's games. She has curly blonde hair, natural in both cases, and I think she spends too much time at work because she has begun to resemble a palomino, big teeth and all.

Emma Chaplian is a true Southern belle in the classic tradition of the women who were born in this part of the country. Justin once told me that she had a whole

collection of tee shirts and coffee mugs marked GRITS. Not in reference to the food, but an acronym: Girls Raised In The South. She wears perfume that smells like gardenias and speaks as if she has a mouthful of honey at all times and when she drinks too much, she laughs too loud, sounding just like a horse. I know that last detail first-hand; many times she frequents the same bar I do, and she inevitably ends up a table or two away from me, with her sorority sisters or Justin and his teammates. After an hour or two, she begins to make that horrible whinnying noise and I smile to myself.

I am never jealous of Emma Chaplian, and I certainly am not bitter about her role in Justin's life. I truly believe that I have the best of him: the ball player, the pitcher in control. I want no part of the insecure classics major who shows up at Kappa date nights in a tuxedo or his pajamas or whatever the ruling sisters deigned appropriate attire for the evening.

But I do not like her, and I do not like that we are connected, as women who share the same man in different ways often find themselves. I do not believe this, but I often hear that in such cases, the girlfriend secretly wants to be the other woman, and vice versa, and I fear that this will happen to us, to me.

She and I never spoke before this semester, but now we have a class together, and last Friday night she stepped over to my table to ask me about my Romanticism paper. "I just don't know what I am going to write about," she said, her vowels longer than usual, her words slowed by too many gin and tonics.

She squeezed into the booth across from me, sloshing her clear drink onto my shirt. I glanced over at Justin, but his back was to us. I grabbed my beer to steady my trembling hand.

“Ohmagod, you know my boyfriend, right?” She must have noticed my eyes, and I mentally warned myself to be more careful. “He’s an athlete – we’re so different. I sometimes wonder why we are together.”

Could she know? My fears were calmed, momentarily, as she launched into a long story about her last sorority mixer, and for the countless time, I felt grateful that I didn’t have her life.

My distaste for her grew as she talked and talked, her voice louder and more equine with each phrase. Justin noticed his girlfriend’s new location, and the alarm that spread across his face was obvious. I watched his eyes betray his indecision: should he join us or leave the situation to me? I willed my gaze to reassure him that his girlfriend wasn’t capable of noticing anything outside of her own little horse-lined, sorority- charmed, gin-tinted world.

She launched into yet another sorority mixer tale, which Justin thankfully sidetracked by sliding into our booth next to me. I slid out the other side.

“I’m going to the bathroom.” I whispered, which Emma Chaplian didn’t even notice. I walked quickly away, and when I turned back, I saw that she was still chattering away, even though Justin’s head was completely turned, watching me.

I was standing on the other side of the bar, facing but not seeing them, looking instead at the image shining in the big dented mirror behind them. It was not my own

visage in the reflection, but I knew the name of the woman who shimmered just beyond Emma Chaplain's peach-encrusted shoulder. And at that moment, the situation became clear to me, and the words I had so often denied rushed through my brain.

I am my mother.

Today, I feel her haunting me, my actual mother and not the baseball-watching, cookie-baking, laugh-lined woman I have created to replace her. While I have chosen a route as different as possible, I have ended up in exactly the same destination. I am the woman I said I would never be.

I inserted Justin into the place where my imagination creates my past, fills in the gaps, makes pretty stories about primary colors and vacations at the beach. When really, his role is that of the complete opposite. With him, I'm taking something that doesn't belong to me, making him want me more than anything, then keeping him at a distance.

"You understand me," Justin tells me. "You speak the language I speak."

This is true: we talk of fastballs and breaking balls and perfect games; we speak of the slide step to first base and the six-four-three double play. I can read all the catcher's signs, and I know when to steal third and I know when to play it safe, to keep my foot on the canvas bag.

It's a simple language, one we've mastered with both our tongues and our bodies. But it's a duplicity that I've created, a manipulation I've invented, convincing

him that the pull of the diamond is enough to join us, holding the power to smash his safe, precarious life into pieces with a word, to leave him with nothing if I so chose.

“This is what we need,” Justin says to me now, lifting me up to hold me closer to him under the heavy rain clouds.

“I don’t need this,” I say, extracting my body from his embrace. “This isn’t real to me. This is all just compensation for your inadequacies, the problems you can’t possibly handle on your own.”

I watch his face change, unsure of what I’m saying. When we are together, he sometimes speaks of Emma Chaplian, the secret mean things you say about the person you love when you are betraying them. But I’d never used it before, never thrown his words back at him, as I am prepared to do now.

This is my legacy, this is my true inheritance I’ve tried so hard to bury beneath tales of warm sand and children splashing in the surf.

“My mother is dead.” My words fall between us as I use them to banish her ghost from the atmosphere. Justin’s forehead crumbles in confusion, as I continue, “Of course, women with her habits don’t usually live long and fruitful lives.”

What habits? I watch Justin’s brain try to process this information; his version of my mother is the one of baseball games and pot roast dinners, nothing fatal or tragic about those things.

His face almost instantly registers sympathy, however, as the right emotion. I watch him put aside his own thoughts to concentrate on comforting me.

"I'm sorry," he says, wrapping his arms around my body, pressing his mouth on top of my own. For a moment, I allow myself to respond, tasting the rain along with his confusion. But only a moment.

I wrench myself free of his tight grasp in mid-kiss, leaving him to call out after me as I run across the field. Raindrops roll down my cheeks as he stands behind me, uncertain and alone and covered in water, as sodden as a young child left behind after a day at the beach.

The Fourth Inning: Girls Can't Play Baseball

You have this dream.

You've had it ever since you were twelve years old, no, probably longer than that, when you were eight, seven, six, taking your first swing at the tee, then knocking it over like every other kid in Little League, maroon tee-shirt untucked, gum stuck on the end of the heavy wooden bat, the same girl who'd spend her teen years diving into second and tacking posters of Ken Griffey Jr. and Craig Biggio and Brady Anderson to her bedroom wall. You were going to be the first girl, the first woman, to play major league baseball.

The dream has become faded, worn around the edges, but still something you pin to spotted mirrors in motel bathrooms. You try out for teams in independent leagues, fighting for each opportunity to play baseball. You move around a lot, living in college towns and small communities where you play alongside men who cling to their childhood fantasies. Small apartments with water stains on the ceilings and the leftover smells of prior tenants burned into the walls come cheap, but even these can't be paid

for on a semi-pro salary. You learn other skills. Every town has a sports bar, and you make an excellent bartender.

You've been around men your whole life, brothers, teammates, and you know how to twist your smile into something alluring, know how to throw a retort without offending, and your instincts are quick. Tonight, the man in front of you asks for something stronger than the beer he's holding in his tar-stained hand.

"Make it fast, girl," he snarls, beer foam dripping into his grey beard, landing on the wood surface that separates you.

You serve the shot as if you're fielding a base hit, slamming the glass quickly, the way you gun the ball toward first to cut down an overly confident runner. You are rewarded with a grunt, but you don't care. This man holds no interest for you.

"Hey, she's not just a girl– she's a celebrity. She's on that team, the Rangers, the one that plays on the old American Legion field down by the high school," his younger friend corrects him. He has sharp green eyes that focus on you with curiosity, and maybe desire.

You return his gaze, tossing a flirtatious smile as you heed another patron's call. But you listen as he talks about you: how you are strong, and can hit, and how your teammates don't seem to mind having a woman play beside them. He is called Jackson, but you don't know if that's his first name or last. His companion snickers something about your ass, or a piece of ass – it's loud in the bar and the sounds of different NBA games compete from blaring television sets placed close together, so you aren't sure

exactly what is being said. Jackson's tone is sharp enough to cut his friend's laugh, and you start to wonder what his mouth tastes like.

"My sister's last name is Jackson," you tell him, pressing your hip against the surface of the bar.

"Really?" he says, his eyes still green, still intent. "So I take it that one of you is married, otherwise you would have said it was your last name, too."

"She's the wife," you laugh back, making sure your smile is wide enough to show your teeth. "A mother, too."

"So that makes you an auntie."

"Twice." You find yourself talking about Abby and Alicia. Abby, your first niece, is six and chubby and soft and smells like rain. Alicia is four, and you have a picture of her that you keep in your backpack, tucked between your mixed drink notes and folded issues of *The Sporting News*.

"They sound beautiful." Jackson hasn't taken his eyes off of you, and you haven't had any man listen to you so intently on the subject of children. Come to think of it, you haven't ever spoken to a man about your nieces before. You are much more comfortable sticking to things you know: fastballs, bloated contracts, SportsCenter versus The Best Damn Sports Show.

"So you know who I am?"

"Not only that, but I've even seen you play."

"What did you think?"

"Pretty good, for a girl." His smile suggests he's teasing, but you don't like these kinds of jokes. You toss your hair and nod to a customer over his shoulder, getting back to the business of bartending.

You sent Abby, your first niece, a baseball uniform when she was born, and Mandy's thank you note was polite but vague. When you visited that summer, Mandy dressed Abby in your gift, and you were proud to carry your niece, the first baby you ever were brave enough to tuck under your arm, to the park. The tiny uniform still had creases from the packaging, and you soon learned why: every five minutes you had to correct a stranger who'd say, "What a cute little boy!"

"So are you going to tell me more about you?" Jackson has followed you, leaving his scowling friend at the other end of the bar.

"Not much to tell." You shrug your shoulders. "Do you want to hear about how I was the best player on my high school baseball team? Or about my softball scholarship to Florida State?"

Not baseball, though. Despite the newspaper articles written about your prowess on the base paths, despite your high batting average and your quick hands at short, you were not recruited by a single Division One baseball school. You can still describe the sour taste that stayed on your mouth for a whole spring, still name the anger that drove you to play harder, better than anyone else, the same emotion that continues to haunt you to this day.

"So can I come over and look at your scrapbook?"

"I don't save my clippings."

The words are light, but you imagine the blue book with the faded gold trim your mother keeps in her bottom desk drawer. It's been awhile since any new articles have been added to her collection; you stopped sending the box scores home a long time ago.

"Let me feel that muscle again," one of the regulars hollers. You are a circus attraction to them, but you are used to it. You are stared at so often, like a hyena at a zoo or a small child with a harelip. People gape at you openly, ask you to flex for them, want to feel the bones beneath the surface.

You roll up your sleeve and lean over the bar, smiling at Jackson as men touch your skin. You are proud of what you look like, take pleasure in your strong calves and rounded muscles. You are not stacked like a body builder. Your flesh belongs to a woman's body, albeit one more powerful than the standard model.

Jackson stays until closing, watching as you pull hot wet glasses out of the dishwasher, even helps you put them back on the shelf. You pop the caps off two beers, and motion to a table on the opposite side of the room from where your manager sits with his girlfriend.

"Let me just check my machine," you tell him.

Your first message is from your mother, her voice distant on the tape. On television, football players are always gushing about their mamas, saying how close they are and how they talk on the phone every day. Your mom calls once a week, and never when you are at home. Her message is full of news about her grandchildren, and Bill's engagement and impending wedding. "Do you know how much the country club costs

on a Saturday in June? I don't know how we got roped into paying for part of this one, too."

You save the message before it ends; it's too late listen to your mother's list of grievances. The second call is from an old coach, whose voice is steady as he tells you the woman's professional league you tried out for last month has fallen through, not enough sponsors, too little money, but he wants you to call him back tonight anyway, no matter how late it gets. You've expected this call; these things never work out, but still, you press the numbers to delete the message.

Jackson is waiting for you, his beer almost empty, and you sit beside him, enjoying the still-cold foam as it slides down your throat. You open your backpack to get out a pen, and Alicia's picture falls out.

"This is my niece," you tell him. "The second one."

"She looks like you."

He's lying, you know, because the little blonde girl in the cheerleading uniform is a perfect replica of Mandy, who is as different from you as a sister can be. The pleated skirt is baby blue, and falls right above Alicia's dimpled knees; even in the studio photograph, it appears well-worn. Having learned your lesson with Abby, you sent the outfit upon your second niece's birth, and this picture is your reward.

"So are you coming home with me?"

Jackson's voice is husky, teasing. You breathe the smell of men every day, every time you are on the field you are engulfed in their sweat, but you have decided that as a rule, you will not sleep with your teammates. Like all the rules in your life, this one has

been broken a few times, but not in this town, not on this team. There has to be someone, something to fill the gap, and why not him, why not tonight?

But you think of the game you have tomorrow, the call you should return. You shake your head no, opting instead to take his phone number scrawled on a bar napkin. His mouth lingers on yours, and mingled with the Bud Light and the Stoli shots is the taste of desire, and perhaps a tablespoon of regret.

“Call me,” he breathes, and then he is gone.

You count the wet dollar bills, satisfied it’s enough to pay your cable bill, and dream about playing baseball for real.

On the field, you warm up beside your teammates, the jokes you’ve heard your entire life exaggerated, stretched out like your hamstrings, your arms, your calves. The bats are familiar in your hands, rough and uneven against calloused skin. Inside your uniform, you disappear, becoming one of them, hair length no longer an issue, this is not the New York Yankees, and half your teammates have locks longer than your own, sometimes braided, sometimes grown in big bushy afros, a few of the Metallica boys wear mullets, like boys, not like men.

You play short. Height is not a problem at this position, and you’re tall for a girl though not for a man, and you find the perfect spot between second and third, moving the infield dirt around with the toe of a Reebok spike, making waves across the thick red surface. Wearing it in. Beating it down. Making it soft, pliant, so it’ll do what you want it to. In front of you, the grassy green stretches from mound to plate, brown where the

sun has singed it too quickly, the grounds crew at this tenth-rate park all but nonexistent, someone's uncle with a hose coming out to water it sporadically.

Not like Fenway. Last summer, you took a week to visit your sister Mandy in Boston, took the nieces to their first ballgame. Sat them in the grandstand seats behind first base, up under the green overhang, in the blue slotted seats set back from the field, but close enough for Alicia to want to join the green fuzzy mascot dancing on top of the dugout. You tried to teach Abby how to keep score, but she was far too young to understand the boxes and the lines, wanted a hot dog, a pink brown and white striped ice cream bar, cotton candy, to go home after the third inning. With two young girls – toddlers, really – it was almost impossible to watch the game, pay attention to the men, the boys, most of them your age, maybe a little older, some even younger than you, living your dream in their sharp white uniforms and blue solid ball caps. The grass was perfect; that, you noticed, velvety green and thick beneath the players' spikes, a wide vast outfield uninterrupted by divots or patches of dirt, an infield brushed and meticulously groomed between innings, a diamond shining with perfection despite its age.

You will play on that field someday. You'll be the one standing on the edge of straight bright green infield grass, and not here, not next to ragged weeds and ill-drawn baselines. The players who surround you won't be these small time rejects, guys who fix cars, who deliver newspapers, who sweep out the bars after the customers go home, guys who were never quite good enough to be drafted, or if they were, never quite

smart enough to sign the contract, impress the right people, avoid the trouble, make the moves.

“Hit it to the girl.” That’s what they always say, not always in those words, usually it’s much more crass, or less vocal, in their eyes, their faces, not their voices, which you couldn’t hear anyway from where you stand, bouncing on the balls of your toes between second and third, owning this patch of dirt. You see it in their bats, the way they do their best to aim their swing right at you, which is fine, you’re in the dirt more than any of your teammates, one moment stretching to your left, the other flopping to your right, snagging balls sent spiraling off the ends of hard wooden bats, knocking down potential hits, throwing across your body, across the diamond, getting the runner at first, making the putout at second, or, your favorite, starting the double play. The six in the six-four-three.

In Boston, the shortstop was a god. He owned Fenway Park, and every other boy, girl, grown man or woman in a Sox jersey had his name, his number on their backs. Something happened to this position since you were a girl, something elevated it from the place where they stuck the quick, scrawny kids who couldn’t hit very well to the training ground for potential superstars.

You are that god. This position is yours; you’ve earned it, with speed, with quick hands, with the scrape marks and bruises that cover your legs, your hips, the sides of your waist. Here, you face off against that asshole with the bat, bend your knees down lower, glove against the polyester of the tight white uniform pant, and dare him to try, just try to hit the ball your way.

He does. The ball loses its roundness as it streaks off the tip of the wooden bat, across the diamond, pitcher not moving because his instincts are either too slow or too fast, that ball is out of his control, it's yours, only yours, you miss it and it's bouncing across the outfield grass, the responsibility of the racing centerfielder who was playing this asshole deep, whose only hope, at that point, would be to contain the damage to a double, maybe a single if the leadoff guy is slower than he looks.

You don't miss. Your body flops against red dirt, in your face, in your nose, your left arm stretching out as far as it will take you, the pressure of ball against glove snapping your hand back. Right hand flies instinctively toward left, the ball won't fall, can't fall, has to stay right there, cradled against your palm, burning through the leather clamped shut. You scramble to your feet; if a runner had been at first, you'd gun the ball across the diamond, beating him back to where he belonged.

But this was the leadoff hitter. Fallon jogs over from second and hits you on the ass with his glove; Ortiz yells, good job, man, from third. The pitcher nods, he always nods, then turns to face the next batter, the next one who'll challenge you with his dark stare and his black eyes, programmed to ignore what he'd just witnessed, too dumb to learn from anyone else's mistakes, instead falling back on the lesson taught all the way back in Little League. Girls can't play baseball. You wipe the dirt off your hands, leaving big streaks down the front of a uniform that already looks game worn, and scuff the ground you own, ready to do it all over again.

One down, twenty-six to go.

“Sharp, you’ve gotta do something here.”

Same game, hours later. Bottom of the seventh, two on, two out, your team down by two. Not your fault: your nine putouts were flawless, none of this bobble the ball shit. The crowd cheers your name, you hear it from the dugout as you glide up the steps, all six hundred of them, chanting “Sharp, Sharp, Sharp.”

The crowd is so small, you can pull out voices, faces, recognize the older woman in the red tank top who comes to every home game, the heavy guy with the five kids, are they all his, or is he that guy, the guy the neighborhood always depends on. Jeff Sharp was that guy, his own four kids plus friends plus neighbors plus Little League teammates crowding into the big blue station wagon, your dad kind of absent-minded, pulling out his wallet and squinting at how many kids to buy tickets for, the ticket girls waving you all in.

“Bring it home, Emily!” That’s the guy who always gets to the ballpark first, folds his lawn chair outside the gates until the groundskeeper – really, the janitor from the local high school who needs the summer work – unlocks the heavy chain from around the iron fence. Beside him, three teenage girls clap their hands, long hair in shades of auburn, gold and chestnut falling in front of faces despite the sweat-inducing heat.

The voices, young and old, chanting your name as you stride to the plate. The weight of the bat is so familiar in your hands, the handle so worn, so known, that even if thin leather batting gloves didn’t separate skin from wood, you’d still never collect a single splinter. You throw righty, but you bat left, digging your heels into the dirt

around the first-base side of home plate, your back to your own dugout, arms lifted, off your shoulders, kicking dirt backwards toward the catcher, toward the ump.

In Fenway Park, the balls traveled quickly off the edge of the bat, over the left field wall and into the new seats built on top of it in what looked like an engineering impossibility. You tried to get Abby to follow the trajectory of a homerun ball, holding her up over your head, onto your shoulders, so she is above the crowds of people on their feet and cheering.

“See it? See it, Abby?”

“I don’t see anything, Auntie Emileeeee,” she whined, pulling your name out for several beats. “Put me down.”

This field, this stretch of wilted green and dirt, had a fence instead of a wall, five feet high, dotted with a scant few cardboard signs advertising local businesses, but was otherwise generically chain-linked, covered with blue mesh netting. You think about it, think about wailing that ball over the ragged fence, making it easy. But it’s a trade off: homerun swings are more likely to miss than the ones aimed toward the gap between center and short, and you’re a singles hitter, gender catching up to you no matter how many pounds you bench press before shifts behind the bar.

“Let’s go, Sharp!” A voice separates itself from the crowd, smoky and deep in the intonations of your last name, making it sound like a command, a descriptive adverb. You don’t glance behind the batters box, but then you do, and it’s him, the guy from the bar, holding a beer and yelling your name. This isn’t the first time it’s

happened, a guy shows up at the ballpark, has a hot dog, tries to flirt between innings, but they usually aren't so loud.

Look back at the mound, at the six-one righty with the paunch poking through the stretched polyester of his grey uniform shirt, trying to smirk, his face cocky with relief, gonna get out of this jam, god's sent me the girl, but behind the confident glare, oh shit, can't let her pound me, can't let this happen.

Ball one. Wait for it. Low, just outside. Maybe a lucky call.

Ball two. Pitcher lost control, supposed to be a fast ball, but spiraled away from him, sent the catcher lunging to his left. Directly across from you, Ramirez cheats off second, edging away from the bag and looking at Fallon on third. Both men ready to run, ready to pound the dirt, fly down the faded white chalk base path and slide into home, just waiting on you.

Strike one. Practice swing, wanting to try him out, the pitch is too low, maybe even a bit too inside for contact. The smirk gains confidence; first base may be open, but he doesn't want to let you on, doesn't want this to end in a tie. He wants to get you out. Kill you, chop you into a million pieces and swallow you down with a pitcher of domestic beer.

You don't let him get strike two. With the voice of a man you want to sleep with echoing in your ears, you connect on a high fastball, sending his pitch over the head of the leaping second baseman, beyond the reach of the centerfielder, playing you in, bouncing on that huge stretch of unoccupied outfield grass, scoring Fallon, scoring Ramirez, and when the dust around the infield clears, you're standing on second base,

spikes on the musty once-white bag, all six hundred fans on their feet, cheering you, cheering your name, and it's moments like these when the dream is fanned, the dream is kept alive.

Dreams, of course, are just dreams, unobtainable in the harsh Texas sunlight that burns through the July morning. The deck is unfamiliar, red wood, burnished smooth and rubbed clean, polished with oils and treatments and whatever it is men who love their decks buy to keep them shiny and new like this one. The wood is soft on your bare feet, your toe tracing the smooth lines between the grooves. Your dad worked with wood, and your second oldest brother is a carpenter, so you should know the details, but you were always too busy working on your swing, begging Bill or Jeff to hit you ground balls and toss you pop flies, to learn much of anything else besides this game.

On the other side of the sliding glass doors, Jackson – first name, not last – sleeps, his tight muscled body crammed into a pair of faded green boxer shorts, curled away from you on the uncovered bed. The sheet is wrapped around your body, tucking under the ends of the off-white material as you sink onto the picnic bench, red and smooth as the deck floor. It needs washing. Men who live alone never quite figure out when it's time to wash the sheets; you think you'd be used to these men-boy smells from all the locker rooms you've found yourself inside, but you wish you'd done something – found a tee-shirt in the closet, dug your underwear out from some corner – other than wrap yourself in this dirty, man-smelling, sex-drenched sheet.

The sun is warm from your skin, still hot from last night, from the game, from the win, from the drinks at the bar – not your bar – afterward with your teammates, from Jackson's hand on your neck, casually, unsure of how much to touch you around the guys. To him, your teammates seemed like twelve protective brothers, and he was shy in the bar, not knowing they couldn't give a shit, as long as you hit the ball, threw the ball, caught the ball, the way you did so well.

It was sweet. You don't get to experience guys being sweet too often, so that's why you followed him outside, made out with him in the parking lot crammed with pickup trucks and dented Fords, then fucked him three times – once in the kitchen, twice in the bedroom – before falling asleep beside him, his thin arms wrapped around your chest as you curled into his unclean bed.

He sleeps, and he should sleep for some time more, you imagine, while you sit outside here on this porch he built, this porch he loves so much he spends entire Saturdays under the relentlessly unkind Texas sun, spoiling the wood, slaving to its every need.

You look up from the wood, away from the trees clustered just beyond this porch, and catch the image looking back at you in the glass sliding doors, a face you don't recognize, a woman you don't recall. She's too distorted in the sunlight, smaller than her teammates, made of something softer, something genetically unable to compete against the boys she's longed to be one of her entire life. The skin is too soft, the breasts, as small as they may be, still too large, too defined to fit right under the polyester

uniform shirt, the arms never quite strong enough, the hips too round, the hair too long, the hardness in her eyes, her mouth, too crafted, put there with too much effort.

This is what they see when they see you. A freak. A girl playing at a man's game.

There is nothing beyond these days with this low-class team, no minor league squads looking for an attraction to sell tickets, no major league clubs wanting to sign the Jackie Robinson of the new millennium, nothing in this game beyond small glories and long nights with strange men, and as happy as you are, as much as you love your life at this very moment, this isn't your dream. This isn't what you signed on for, back in Little League, back when you were the fastest kid on the team, the best hitter, the best pitcher, the best everything, and the only girl. Your mom's scrapbook is full of superlatives, but they stopped around the time you turned eighteen, with no baseball scholarships were coming your way, no scouts lining up to judge your size, your power, like they did with the boys.

Under the bright morning sunlight, the heat of the day already beating down on your arms, warming your skin, making you shed the dirty sheet and stand naked on this unfamiliar porch, you witness the death of the dream.

It's not that simple – it's never that simple, letting go of something you've held onto for so long. It is only July; you still have two more months of baseball ahead of you, two long and sweltering months to witness the protracted wake and funeral of your dream. You will travel to small towns, places so empty they don't exist on many

maps. You will win sometimes, and still lose a lot, and one day you will stare at an opposing team crafted of a band of men so pathetic they only have nine uniform shirts, and when the pitcher is pulled, he has to hand his shirt, along with the ball, it to his replacement. The dream is fading, and with it the memory of the girl you once were, until you can no longer taste it, until you forget what it's like to hold it in your mouth, mixed with sweat and spit and infield dirt.

Sometimes you will think about Abby in her baseball uniform and Alicia the cheerleader, and wonder if it will be different for them. They can't be like your sister Mandy, who begged your parents to let her do ballet instead of tee-ball, who hid your training bra and called you a boy until you cried. Your nieces are better than that, stronger than the mother who tries to dress them in pink and mold them into delicate little flowers, not understanding their need to run, to fall, to get dirty, to play catch until the streetlights come on. With nothing else to hold onto, to look forward to, to roll around on your tongue, you will make a promise to yourself. One day, you will say, you'll be there for them, and you will teach them how to throw, how to hit, how to catch.

The Fifth Inning: Hardball

No one ever told Jenna men were so hairy.

This was definitely not a chapter in the bible of knowledge her father had imparted to her about life and money and baseball, subjects close to her daddy's heart – and wallet. When she was five years old, he sat her in his lap up in the stands of the Winston-Salem Warthogs and the two of them watched the lanky, sinewy, thick-armed boys on the field below them, men she saw as strong and proud, but never hairy. "Some day, my daughter," he had told her with his overly loud voice, "This will all be yours."

"This," at the time, was a modest sized newspaper (circulation 95,000), three gas stations, a cola bottling plant, and the Warthogs, Class A club of the Chicago White Sox. By the time Jenna was ten, "this" included a chain of seven daily newspapers, two network affiliates, and an NHL hockey team. When Jenna left for Columbia, her father's empire had expanded to include several cable stations, newspapers, and a media conglomerate that bore their last name.

She reached down to pick up a damp towel, small pieces of hair stuck to the white fibers. When she was five, she recalled visiting this locker room in her black

patent leather Mary Janes and white ankle socks, her father holding her hand tightly and making sure no half-naked ballplayers lingered behind the lockers. Now, as assistant manager of stadium operations of the team her daddy once owned, Jenna found herself straightening up the same space after every game, making it presentable for the cameras on hand to capture the post-game interview in the area that doubled as a press room.

When the media arrived – charging into the room from one door, just as the team filed in through an opposite one, Jenna in between, scooping up the last jock strap left on the locker room floor and fighting the impulse to gag, scrub her hands – they crowded in together, the press were represented by two television crews and a handful of print reporters, the team by a dozen players and their manager, a thin man with red hair still wet from the showers who never said much of everything.

“It was a team effort.”

“I just try to do my job, show up and play every day, and sometimes I get a pitch that has my name on it.”

“I didn’t have my best stuff today, that’s all.”

The canned answers did nothing to illuminate the game Jenna had just witnessed between running scores and checking stats; the six-four-three double play in the top of the fifth inning was just short of a work of art, the shortstop falling on the groundball bouncing up the middle, destined for left-centerfield, then throwing to second from his knees, the ball barely in the infielder’s glover before he pivoted to his left, firing to first in time for the out. Or the way the reliever had just begun to master the knuckleball, the strange pitch dancing out of his glove and floating over the plate, baffling the Single A

batters used to a steady diet of fastballs. She didn't know if it was the movies, or the agents who peppered the stands, or the twenty-four hours of ESPN burned into their heads, but these kids had already mastered the art of the bland sound bite.

Finally bored with the same sound bites, the reporters shut their notebooks, the camera lights were switched off, and the players filed out of the locker room, grouped together in threes and fours. Jenna watched them leave, thankful that her own countdown to the end of the long day had begun; once these boys had cleared out, once the clubhouse kids – not much younger than the players – had finished up, she could turn off the lights and go home herself.

“So what did you think of the game tonight?”

Jenna had already turned away from the players, was supervising the two kids from Wake Forrest Prep who were lining up bats for the next day's game, when the voice echoed behind her, both familiar and not.

“It was OK,” she said, turning around to face the second baseman, lingering behind in his polo shirt and khaki shorts. “Neelan didn't look too bad on the mound, although that error in the fifth by Wadsin could have cost you guys the game.”

His cheeks were red, wind or sun burned, or maybe just freshly scrubbed with the industrial strength soap the team bought in bulk. He'd picked up a bat from the neat line, and was balancing it on the palm of his hand. “But it didn't, did it?”

The clubhouse boys had stopped working, and were staring at the player with outright envy.

“I'm Ryne O'Malley,” he said, ignoring the boys.

"I know who you are."

"It just seems like every time we talk, you forget who I am."

Jenna smiled, tossing three batting gloves into the box by the door. "I don't forget you," she replied. "We just don't talk very much."

"You mean you don't talk very much."

"Maybe."

The bat clattered to the ground, and the one of the boys pounced at it, snapping it off the ground then laying it carefully alongside all the other bats, their work for the evening completed. They gawked at Ryne, until Jenna motioned to the door, and they left without saying a word.

"Kind of a strange thing for this place, don't you think? It's like no one else around here ever shuts up and just watches the game."

"That's a weird way to put it," Jenna said, thinking of the wide empty row of employee seats she had to herself pretty much every game. Her job kept her busy – the game kept everyone busy – but she always snuck away for a put-out or two, sometimes for an inning at a time, back and forth from the press box to those seats, the ones with the perfect view of the pitcher's face, right behind home plate.

"It's just honest." His shirt was light blue, Carolina blue, and the collar was twisted downward, like it needed a good ironing. Jenna wondered if he was like all the other Southern boys, away from home for the first time and absolutely clueless without their mamas. Maybe all these kids were the same – spoiled because of their talent, then sent out on their own.

“Are you done in here?” Jenna gestured to the room, hoping to ease him out into the night, push him toward the barbeque joint across the highway where his teammates were probably already on a second pitcher of beer.

“Maybe I’d just like it if you talked more,” Ryne said, not getting the hint – or ignoring it, if he did.

“I don’t really have that much to say,” Jenna said.

“I think that’s a lie.”

He turned away suddenly, and practically jogged out of the locker room. Finally alone, Jenna took one last look around her, at the uniforms bagged for the cleaning service, the bats all lined up for the next morning’s practice, the showers ready for the early morning cleaning staff, and flipped out the lights.

Another letter. Jenna shuffled through the small pile of already separated mail – two catalogs, four credit card come-ons, a flyer and a magazine beneath the thin envelope with the now-familiar marking “From a Federal Corrections Inmate” stamped in big block letters across the back. It would stay in that pile, underneath unopened promises of zero percent interest rates and J Crew sweaters, and eventually be shuffled somewhere else in an infrequent cleaning binge. She imagined her father, in the country-club like prison where Pete Rose once did time, in his neat uniform (orange? No, too pedestrian. Blue, maybe, or pale green) sitting down with his pencils and his erasers, carefully printing out these weekly letters to his only child.

Did he describe the trial? The lawyers Jenna met with daily, his lawyers, in the same grey suits day after day, Jenna dressed impeccably in clothes picked out by her notably absent mother, watching the spectacle at home on Court TV. Every day, her father stood or sat directly in front of her, just as neat and presentable as she in his custom-made suits and a light blue tie the same color as his eyes, his hands folded and his silver hair brushed in neat lines across his forehead, struggling to keep the arrogance out of his facial expression, keep it even and neat and repenting. Jenna, taking a leave from her graduate program in English Literature, her courtroom experience limited to television episodes of Law and Order, understood maybe one-fifth of what was said around her. Until the verdict – that, she got.

It ended with her father being led away by two federal agents, shaking his lawyers' hands, nodding to the business managers, the reporters, his suit sleeves wrinkled, telling her "I guess I'll miss the season," and it was the one thing they had between them. The reporters swarmed around Jenna, calling her name, and she knew each one of them, had memorized the bumps of their faces even though she'd never given them a single quote and wasn't about to start now, with her father disappearing through the stately wood doors of the courtroom. Then it was over. After, after her father's money, gone, the mansion in Raleigh, put on the market, bank accounts and investment funds, frozen, her mother, filing for divorce, even Jenna's car, impounded, her father's name on the lease, she came here, to the one former employee who remembered the little girl in the Mary Janes, felt badly for the man who'd once signed his paychecks, and gave Jenna a job at the ballpark.

The letter emphatically buried, Jenna took four steps to the back of the house, onto the wide porch and into the warm night air. It was quiet in her neighborhood. The evening noises were unidentifiable to a girl who'd lived most of her life in cities, who used to stand on the miniscule balcony of her New York apartment and listen to the sirens, the clack of high heels and dogs' paws on the pavement, the sober and drunken voices competing against each other in the alleys between the buildings. Here, the human sounds were removed, the bright buildings and bridges replaced by dull stars and tree branches. In this one-bedroom ranch house, she was far too close to the ground.

The ballpark had wide hallways opening onto small offices, no cubicles and few doors, spanning the length of the upper stands, just above the first base line. The carpet was pre-industrial grey, worn down in most places, and Jenna's shoes shuffled over the dull ground surface between her desk and the photocopy machine, placed directly in front of one of the wide clear windows. As she pressed the copy button, she stared at the long bodies in grey shorts below her, the two dozen Warthogs, most of them a good decade younger than her own twenty-eight years, a number which had never felt old before this summer. Jenna was conscious of the way her jeans fit her body, the way her light hair had begun to grow even lighter in places, of the shiny pair of rings on her left hand, subtle but significant hints to let her know she didn't belong in the world of Ryne O'Malley and his teammates.

The players below her stood from the wet ground, and began running sprints across the sharp outfield, patches of brown burning into the summer grass despite the grounds crew's patient care, watering this field at first light, keeping it as moist as they could without interrupting daily workouts. Here at the park, she learned things she never knew about the game she'd watched with her father on the big screen TV in the Raleigh house or from boxes in New York and San Diego, tickets appearing in a thin Fed-Ex envelope for that weekend's game with Jenna's doorman. For one, the boys worked hard. Injuries or not, they were already here when she arrived at noon, on the field or in the workout room, pushing their already-perfect bodies for any advantage they could squeeze from bones and muscle and pure will. They reminded Jenna of her dad, the ferocity with which he gobbled up companies, the energy he spent plotting to get his picture on the cover of *Time* magazine.

When the copying was finished, the sponsors calls made and a hundred other minor tasks belonging to the assistant manager of stadium operations were completed, when dinner breaks were over and the vendors had begun opening their stands, the smell of funnel cakes, of thick dough hitting hot oil filling the seats, Jenna waited by the side of the dugout for that evening's lineup card. The first fans had begun their decent into the ballpark, clumping together a few feet away from where she sat, most of them kids, younger than ten, older than four, waiting for the players to emerge from the sheltered space below them.

Instead of the manager or one of the clubhouse boys, Ryne O'Malley jumped up over the low blue bar separating the stands from the fields, and swung into the seat

beside Jenna. He smelled of dirt and sweat and leather, scents familiar from her time spent in the locker room, but not here, up close, attached to one individual person.

"Jenna Faircloth," he spoke, and it sounded like a command.

"Jenna Saunders," she corrected.

"You're married?" His voice suddenly lost its confident tones. "You're too young to be married."

Jenna thought of Davis, the man she'd met by accident during the longest days of her father's trial, then wed quickly – too quickly, perhaps – almost immediately afterward, in a ceremony much smaller than the one her mother dreamed of without anyone to give her away.

"I'm twenty-eight," she said.

"That's old."

She turned to face him, the starting second baseman, a lean power hitter with a fast glove but a tendency to swing too much. She knew he wouldn't be called up to the Show this summer; maybe next year, most likely not. But he was young, just out of high school, and for some time more, they'd always be a next year.

"I meant to tell you something when we talked last night, but I didn't," he said, rubbing his dirt-crust hands on his shorts. "You see, my father used to work for yours, well sort of. He was a cameraman at your dad's television station in Atlanta."

Atlanta, just the sound of that town, always turned a reaction from Jenna's stomach. Atlanta, the city where the Faircloth Empire began to crack, where her father's

office was raided by Federal agents, a city where she'd never go again if she could help it.

"I met him once," Ryne was saying, as if her father's troubles there were nonexistent. "I was just in junior high, but I was already playing baseball. We talked about my career, and he told me that he had a daughter, and that she was smart, but she'd probably never be able to play hardball."

"Really? You remember my dad saying that to you?" Jenna's father smelled like leather; it was a background scent, a deep rich one she'd always identified as masculine, often obscured by her mother's perfume, by the slightly more sweet, solid smell of adrenaline that always accompanied her father just before or just after he executed a major deal, which was pretty much every day of Jenna's life until the trial.

"It's kind of strange, isn't it?" Ryne shook his head. "It stuck with me, it was such a weird thing to say to a kid. I hadn't really thought of it, until meeting you now, and that's strange, too."

"You're not the only one who thinks it's strange."

"So why are you here? Why come back to North Carolina?"

The field was now empty of its players, the grounds crew making the final adjustments to the infield grass, the diamond watered one more time to counter the hot Southern sun beating down all day on the heavy packed surface. Soon, the stands around her would be filled with people, fans, children clutching parents' hands or plastic gloves or worn balls, the kids behind her calling out to players who'll take the field in the Warthogs uniforms. Come over here, mister, they'd yell, their voices joining

together, Hey, Number 23, will you sign for me? And they will. They always did, at least a dozen every night, they'd line up with their heads down, reaching for hats and programs and in the rare case, exactly the right card from the team set sold for five dollars at the concession stands, brown hand pressing thick black marker across his own shiny face.

Jenna circled the ballpark, back and forth between the offices and the pressbox before the game began, and when she had time, settled into the row of seats in front of the players' girlfriends and parents, from where she could breathe in the smell of thick barbeque sandwiches and kicked-up dirt. "The best seat in the house is behind the speed guns," her father always said, though it was rare he ever followed this advice, passing up the crowd for the closed-off boxes that swung high above most stadiums. Jenna always looked for the focused men hunched over their machines aimed at the mound, red numbers ringing up velocities passing 80, 90 miles an hour.

Baseball was simple. You threw the ball, you caught the ball, you hit the ball, and then you ran. Sure, there were rules that went along with the actions, but they were orderly and logical. If you swung and then missed the ball, you were out. If you were tagged, you were out. If you arrived at the base before the ball did, then you were safe.

Davis was awake when she arrived home, which was unusual, but not unprecedented. Empty pictures flashed silently across the television screen, the shape of his head reflected in its bright glare. His long, thin legs were propped onto the coffee table, and Jenna watched him, her husband, mouthing the still-new title to herself as

stood in the doorway of their home. Davis was tall, thin, physically nothing like any man she'd ever dated; actually, the complete opposite of the men she knew in boarding school, in graduate school, in New York.

The first night she met him was in a restaurant down the street from the courthouse, the first one she could find without reporters or lawyers hanging around the bar. She asked for a table for one, and received a glare from the hostess; the tall, thin man with her favorite Carolina accent standing behind her said, "We can share a table – you don't even have to talk to me if you don't want to," and so simply, that was how it started.

"How was the game?" He reached up from the chair and pulled Jenna into his lap, his lips on the place where her hair met her forehead. She leaned into his chest as he used the remote control to flip off the television set, which fizzled slowly before fading to black.

"You're awake."

"I don't have to be in the office until 9 tomorrow, so I figured I'd wait up for you."

"That's sweet." The strangest thing about marrying someone you'd only known four months was the way the little things continued to be a surprise. Jenna closed her eyes, afraid her reaction would be too extreme, but it was moments like this when her life ceased containing any sort of familiarity.

“Did the Warthogs win?” Davis loved saying the name of the team, would work it into conversations whenever he could. He thought it was so funny. Jenna told him he had a lot to learn about the minor leagues.

“Yup, 8-4. Fernandez had a triple in the fifth, team score six runs in one inning.”

“How was the crowd?”

“Thirsty Thursdays, so pretty good.” Fewer families, more college-age kids, lining up to buy bottomless plastic mugs of beer.

“Sounds like a blast. Maybe next week I’ll swing by the ballpark.”

Jenna nodded, but knew he wouldn’t make it. Davis wasn’t a baseball fan; he played basketball once a week at the Y and had season tickets to the Panthers, but never garnered much enthusiasm for the sport she loved. He’d been saying the same thing all season, but the truth was, he found the sport rather boring.

“It’s so slow,” he’d complain. “How can you stand it? Real sports have clocks.”

The timelessness was one of the aspects Jenna loved most about baseball, the idea a game could stretch as long as it took, regardless of seconds on a clock. Three outs were three outs, whether they took four minutes or five hours.

That’s what her father said to her at the last baseball game they saw together. It was a playoff game last fall in his company’s box in Boston. She can see her dad in his favorite sky blue polo shirt, a sport jacket over it in deference to the fall air, leaning against the plexi-glass partition separating the ancient ballpark from the interior suite. The shuttle from New York had been full of Yankees fans, jubilant and just a little bit

cocky, and as she wound her way through Fenway Park, Jenna breathed in the excitement characteristic to the Northeast corridor in October.

“Nothing beats the intensity of a Yanks-Sox playoff game,” her father said when the score was 4-3, the box filled with senior-level executives his age, their wives not much older than Jenna, well-dressed people who put aside their suck-up talk of brilliant Faircloth maneuvers long enough to become engrossed in the drama unfolding before them. The game went on long past midnight, well into the next morning, and at times, felt as if it would last forever.

That night, just last season, but so long ago, before Davis, before the Warthogs. Before Jenna looked up from the bar in the Upper West Side and saw her father’s image reflected on the television screen. She was drinking a mojito, the taste of limes now forever associated with her father being led from the Raleigh house in handcuffs, their last name flipping across the close-captioned television screen.

“You seem out of it tonight,” Davis said, breaking the silence that yawned between them.

“Just tired, I guess. You must be, too.”

Why does it feel like a betrayal to try to capture her father’s exact words? She pushes aside the image of her father, gregarious, confident, filling every space, every luxury box until there was no room for anything, anyone else.

“Have you seen your father?”

“That’s a weird question.”

Jenna had grown used to her daily conversations with Ryne O'Malley, anticipating the unexpected. Friday morning, and the rain came down in long clear strips from the heavy grey sky. It'd been such a gorgeous summer up until that point, the evenings clear and warm, the sun bright but never too strong on the weekends. The heat was dry, and seldom humid, nothing like Jenna's summers in New York, spent peeling damp clothes away from blistered skin. Just perfect baseball weather.

"I mean recently," Ryne said. "Since the trial."

"We've been so spoiled," she said, changing the subject. "I don't think we've had a home game rained out all summer."

"Doesn't necessarily mean this will stick around tonight," Ryne said, much more easily moved into the discussion than she expected. "With a little luck, it'll clear up before game time."

"You don't want a night off?"

"Can't imagine what I'd do."

"Come on," Jenna said. "Young kid like you, Friday night in a town like this?"

"This isn't the town you think it is," Ryne said, his face way too serious for the tone of their conversation. "So you've seen your dad in that fancy jail of his?"

What she'd seen was her father's face on the cover of magazines, or the file footage played on the cable news channels, over and over for about a week after his trial, then dropped. Her father in a tuxedo with some mid-major celebrity. Her father standing before Congress, celebrating the passage of another piece of business-favored legislation. Her father with his arm around Jimmy Carter as they built a house together.

Her father being led out of their house by the FBI agents, a maroon folder held up in an unsuccessful attempt to shield his face.

“Not that it’s any of your business,” she finally answered, “but no.”

“I guess got too personal there.”

“It’s OK,” she said. “I bet your father is proud of you.”

“Maybe he would be, if he wasn’t dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

Ryne shrugged his broad shoulders. “Don’t be. It’s not like it’s your fault.”

Jenna wondered why some men did that, always assumed that “I’m sorry,” meant, “I’m at fault,” instead of “I feel bad.” Her father had done that, and it frustrated her. Did he think that she could be to blame for his all his problems on some level, because she wasn’t a son, or at least a child who could have gone to law or business school and actually helped him, instead of wasting his money on an advanced degree she’d never use as far away from him as she could get?

“This conversation has gotten all out of control,” Ryne said with a smile. “I should probably go now.”

“It’s OK,” she said. “You can stay. I want to hear more about your father.”

The rain didn’t stop, and Jenna met Davis at a much nicer restaurant than any other they’d been to in their marriage, which only meant the menus weren’t made of paper. Over a table covered with actual cloth, she studied his face, wondering when the lines around his mouth, the mustache under his nose would start becoming familiar.

His fingers, so thin, stretched across the table, reaching for her own, chubby and unglamorous in comparison. Everything about Davis was thin, almost painfully so, and if she stopped to think about it, Jenna couldn't believe she did it all so fast, allowed herself to depend on this man, this banker, this son of a Southern mama, who stepped into her life at exactly the wrong moment and turned it into the right one.

"I got another letter from my dad this week," she said, watching his face with her blue eyes to see if his expression changed.

It did not.

"Yes, I saw it came for you." Davis had never met her father, not in person. She wondered when, if, that day would come. "Did you open it?"

"No."

"Should I even give them to you? I can put them away, even get rid of them, if you want."

How easy it would be to not even know those thin envelopes with their angry black block letters existed, not to wonder if inside they held fabulous secrets about destiny, about fate, about the designated hitter. About a father's love for his daughter.

"It's fine, it's not really a big deal. He should be out soon – his lawyers said with time off for good behavior, he's only looking at five, maybe six more months."

And then the letters will stop. Jenna doesn't want to think about what will happen then, when her father is a phone call, a car ride away, whether she can slide back into the same relationship, the tickets for plane rides and baseball games that'd show up unannounced through her doorman.

“The Warthogs are on the road this weekend,” she said, hoping that for once, their schedules will align. “So I’ll be home all weekend.”

“Me, too.”

They smiled at each other, identical grins, in anticipation of this unexpected stretch of time together. “You don’t even know her,” Davis’ mother had said to him from a kitchen with too-thin walls for her anxious voice when they told her about their engagement. “I have my whole life to get to know her,” he answered with a line cribbed from Hollywood, but to Jenna, it was the most romantic thing in the world. Months later, she didn’t know much more about Davis beyond the fact that he liked sleeping on his right side and he smelled of Zest soap for the first five minutes after his shower. She was still waiting for their whole lives to start.

The following afternoon showed no trace of the prior day’s rainstorms, and the diamond dried quickly in the summer heat. Before the game, Jenna crossed the plastic rows lining the first and third base lines, rubbing a towel across the rough surfaces of the bleachers alongside the groundskeeper, a man older than her father, who’d been tending to this ballpark, and the ones that came before it, for decades. The team was on the field in their white pants, “Warthogs” stitched across their uniform jerseys in cursive script. By the end of the game, the pants would be grass-stained, remnants of tobacco and Gatorade splashed across the thighs, the shirts coated in sweat and dirt, all piled on the locker room floor. For now, though, for one brief moment, the shirts were new, the

boys inside them all looked the same, as if they had the same promise, the same abilities, would follow the same path through the minor leagues, rising to the Show.

It wasn't true, of course. A kid like Ryne O'Malley may never make it all the way; odds were half these boys' dreams would die there, on that very field. Jenna's father told her this, back when the ballpark was new, when the plastic seats were made of something stronger.

"Not like you," he said to her that day, at least that's what her memory said. Truth was, she'd stopped trusting her memory, stopped believing her father had all the answers.

Maybe she should visit him. She could grab a flight out on Friday, when the Warthogs were on the road, be with her dad by lunchtime. Did they serve lunch in prison? Did you have to call ahead, make an appointment to see a prisoner, even at a low-security country club like the place where her father was kept?

She'd phone Davis after the game; maybe he could take the time off work and come with her. How weird would it be to introduce her father to her husband under these circumstances. To ease the awkwardness, she could tell him about the Warthogs, describe the boys with their confident faces and their tough, quick swings, the way they dove for every hit, ran out every play. She'd bring him scorecards, baseball cards, visual evidence of her new life, show him she was fine, doing just fine, without him, without her father.

The game had already begun, the Warthogs taking the field, ringing the diamond in perfect formation, each one marking their spot in the dirt, on the grass, behind the

plate, on top of the mound. As always, Jenna's eyes were drawn to Ryne O'Malley, somehow taller on the field, edging between second and first, a confidence in the way he stood, the way he patrolled his own patch of dirt, looking exactly the same all his other teammates, black, white, Dominican, Japanese, nationalities melting away under the navy blue caps.

Without the trial, she wouldn't have been here, in the ballpark, her skin turning brown under the summer sunlight, her new husband across town, smiling at her picture on his desk as he counted down the hours until they were together again. The bars that separated her father from freedom marked a line between Jenna before and Jenna after; she didn't want to turn back time, erase what had happened, did not want to be her father's daughter again.

The scouts' gun registered an impressive "89" as the ball flew forward, leaving the pitcher's right hand, then the hitter's wide bat in an almost timeless sequence. Her father would be fine without her. Jenna was needed here.

The Sixth Inning: Pop Fly

“When I was six,” Rachel says to the crease in the green polo shirt beside her, “I knew a girl who wanted to fly.”

“Like this?” The sleeve slides up an arm so thick the shirt had to be custom-ordered from Joseph Aboud himself as Tom Mathers gestures to the front of the plane, to the pilots barricaded beyond the small metal door.

“Not like them.” Rachel doesn’t follow his arm; instead stays focused on the stretch of land outside the plane as they rise upwards, perpendicular to the hot pavement, the scattering of thin Cuban men lifting bags, the cluster of palm trees beyond the runway. Tom’s face hasn’t turned at her words; he, too, watches summer disappear from them, his mouth curved inward.

Outside, the thick waves of Florida blend below the clouds, then Mathers’ body lurches forward, blocking Rachel’s view completely. His nose is not quite pressed against the window, but she can imagine that it would be, can see the six year old boy who occupied the same skin three decades ago, breathless with the opportunity of flight. “Tell me about this girl,” he says to the slate white stretch of sky surrounding them.

“Her name was Anna Wimple, and she was the daughter of one of the vice presidents – we met at a picnic for my dad’s work.”

“You say that like it was IBM and not the Chicago Bulls.”

Rachel shrugs, pulling at the stained cuff of her white button-down shirt, the one that’s been washed so many times the fabric feels more like pajamas than her actual sleepwear does. “She was the only girl there that day my age, so of course we became instant best friends. During the egg toss and the three-legged race, all she talked about was birds – their wing spans, what they ate, where they lived, the life expectancy of the North American swallow.”

She briefly closes her eyes, picturing the open cabins circling the camp ground beside Lake Michigan, the barbeque steaming off the wide grills, the thick slices of watermelon, the way the cotton candy stuck to her fingers, the images that accompanied the strangely grown-up voice coming from the girl with the peach-colored hair and buck teeth destined for braces. Anna Wimple had known everything about flying, and by the time their sundaes had melted into the patches of grass scattered beside the sandy-like beach, she’d told Rachel her secret.

“I’m going to be the first girl to fly,” she’d said, her brown eyes small beneath her blue-framed glasses. “Without a plane, without a glider, even without wings.”

“Eventually, it got annoying,” Rachel says as the plane shakes beneath her, stumbling through a small jolt of turbulence. “I ended up hiding in a room that smelled like cigars with the Nancy Drew book my mom packed for the trip, even though I hated Nancy Drew and would rather have been reading Trixie Belden.”

“Who’s Trixie Belden?” At Rachel’s incredulous response, Tom shifts his shoulders and offers, “I never had sisters.”

“On the ride back into the city, my mom kept gushing about how nice it was that I’d found a friend – this was the year after the Lakers traded my dad, and I’d had the usual shy kid difficulties adjusting to Chicago – and I wanted her to shut up, so I told her I hated Anna, because she was a freak.”

“Why am I not surprised that even as a little kid, Rachel Matheson wasn’t one to pull any punches?”

“Did they teach you clichés in the minors, or was that a skill you developed on your own?”

“Hey, I don’t make fun of your inability to hit a fastball, so you can lay off with the grammar shit.”

“What makes you think I can’t hit a fastball?”

“Braves spring training, 1998. Glavine was tossing his lightest junk right over the plate, and you whiffed like the girl you are.”

“It scares me you remember that.”

Tom turns to face her for the first time since the plane shook away from the gate, his green eyes the exact color of his polo shirt, bright against features that have grown too old too fast, lines spreading out across a face *People Magazine* still calls one of the fifty most beautiful. Rachel is often struck by the fact that these men who play a game for a living always age so much quicker than men with real jobs.

“So what happened to this Anna girl?”

The flight attendants bustle back and forth among the few rows on this side of the curtain, one of them leaning over Rachel for an autograph “for my nephew, he’s a huge fan.” Tom signs the cocktail napkin, his smile wide and automatic.

“Later that summer, my mom got a call from the wife of one of my dad’s teammates,” Rachel says as soon as the flight attendant has moved on to the man in the sharp pinstriped suit, somehow still perfectly creased, in front of them. “She said the team was sending flowers to a funeral for one of the executive’s daughters who’d fallen off the roof of their penthouse.”

The season will begin in New York. In a city of ten million, it’s easy to believe baseball doesn’t exist, can be hidden in one of the thousands of ugly corners away from the gleam of the buildings that march across the island’s best vistas, but the reminders come with furious speed, denizens who’ve never set foot in the Bronx claiming the Yankees as their own, shouting about the Mets off-season moves and promised returns to post-season greatness. There will be bunting, patriotic in its colors, athletic in its shape, draped all over the ancient stadium climbing upward in an unending cyclical motion, enough fans to form their own city – a small one, of course – and a press box that’s wide and old and smells like sweat and sauerkraut in a way that’s been cleaned out of the newer stadiums, which are pretty much all of them, with one or two exceptions.

Rachel will not be in New York. She should be in New York; there will be a room reserved for her at the Marriott Marquis with a view of Central Park, tentative

dinner plans with the features editor from Northwestern, now a stockbroker and recently divorced; even the Upper East Side address of an old roommate hunted off the internet. She should be typing furious pre-game notes into her laptop, snatching adjectives out of the crowd like foul balls, thinking up new and clever ways to describe Yankee Stadium to the millions of readers who've been inundated with prose extolling its charms for the better part of the last century. She will close her eyes, and do the five senses trick: smell (battered popcorn and sweat socks), taste (mustard, cut grass), touch (corrugated plastic, slick and cool), sight (American flag snapping over a cold copper impression of Babe Ruth), and sound (leather meeting leather).

The trick won't work; the smells and sounds she actually experiences will not be the manufactured set from her memory, from her mind, but the dense and antiseptic scents of a hospital room.

She will open her eyes.

"Do you hate your father?"

"What?"

Rachel is losing track of time, as she usually does on planes. She has no idea how many seconds they've been in the air, but she's guessing the number is still countable as the flight attendants have yet to refresh their drinks. Much of her life has been spent on planes, crammed into the ugly blue cloth seats or stretched out in the leather of a first class row molded from models, diplomats, and CEOs before her. When she's on deadline, she almost cannot distinguish between the two; when she's not, when

the last spring training story has been filed and the Preseason Preview has been put to bed – like now – time is suspended as the plane hovers above the ground, and first class feels like the place she wants to be most in the world, where she can stretch out her legs and let her head sink backward, let things come to her.

“You heard me,” Tom says, the ice rattling against the crystal glass in his hands.

“Do you hate your father?”

“Don’t you ever ask normal questions, like, who I picked to win the Final Four?”

“One, I know you picked Kansas, because you’re that predictable, and two, I really don’t give a fuck.”

The last fingernail on her left hand holds half the pink polish from a rare manicure. It forms a jagged edge across her longest nail, the freakishly strong one that rarely breaks, never succumbing to the professional hazards that ravage her other nine nails which don’t ever grow very far past her fingertips. Rachel bends her fingers into her palm, watching the small round half moon rise from the indent.

Beside her, Tom is impatient, playing with his cell phone, flipping the lid up and down repeatedly, trilling out an electronic beep to which his right leg keeps time. As roomy as the leather seats are, he can’t quite adjust his frame, his width, into the leather, and he moves his shoulders back and forth, careening between the hard plastic shell of the airplane and Rachel’s left shoulder. His hands on the cell phone are big, too big for the little numbers, and she wonders how many times he misdials his calls, what his thick hands would look like on the roundness of a basketball. Her father’s hands were big, but thin, and the ball always looked smaller against them, above them, like when he’d

spin it on his index finger when she was five, “Daddy, like the Harlem Globetrotters do.”

“I’m an LA Laker, and you want the Globetrotters.” Her father’s voice comes back to her, echoing through the recycled airplane air, the kindness shaped by distance in a tone that is unexpectedly high, Jewish, they called it, like hearing Woody Allen come out of Bill Bradley’s body. Before she was born, he shattered three of Wilt Chamberlain’s career records at Kansas, letting the sounds of “Rock, Chalk, Jayhawk” shake him all the way to California, where her mother waited, in the same Hollywood coffee shop every day, to be chosen. She had hoped it would be a producer, but settled for the impossibly tall ballplayer. Half a country later, she’d stare wistfully at Janet and Wayne Gretsky and say, “that could have been our life,” but Rachel knew she really meant “should.”

“You’re wrong,” she finally says to Tom, after the flight attendant has refilled his Scotch.

“About your dad?”

“About my pool. I picked Duke this year.”

The crowds will line up for the gambling boats that troll the river serving as the border between Illinois and Missouri, money clutched and eyes brimming as if luck were something solid, something substantial they could carry in their heavy fists between twenty dollar bills. The lines snaking around the roped off areas beside the dusky wide Mississippi will be longer than the ones for beer in Busch Stadium; the Cubs

are in town and the Cards are playing like they can't see the uniforms, don't recognize the rivalry engulfing and enraging their fans. It will never be too soon for the people of St. Louis to hate the Cubs.

The ballpark isn't far from its namesake, the big brewery that pumps water into beer and built this city on the east side of the west, this city of wide open spaces crammed with factories and futon outlets, brick houses blocked close together, a downtown impervious to the thrills of revitalization, of ballparks in the middle of urban sprawl. Missouri is a flat state, too flat, stretching from one major league city to the next with no texture in between, no bumps, no mountains, no twists or turns, just straight flat Midwestern land running right to left, St. Louis to Kansas City and back again.

The weekend series will begin with a warning shot, a fastball to the crease in the back of a shiny white Cardinals uniform, hitting just about the red letters and sending the contents of both dugouts charging out to the mound, a shot that will empty two bullpens as a dozen men, some in blue and grey, others in red and white, will jog across the empty expanse of outfield grass and reach the edges of the pushing, shoving, grey-red-blue-white mass just as it breaks. The scores will be high at night -- 8-7, 12-10 -- and low at dusk, as the series will end with a 1-0 gem, the perfect pitcher's duel, fought between a baby-faced right-hander shaking off the underachiever label that's dogged him since the minors, and a veteran lefty, just thirty, who'll struggle to find the plate all spring, fighting just to keep his spot in the rotation. The game will be an epic contest between good and evil, Rachel will write, the hard-drinking Cardinal locked in a bitter rivalry with the Cub's Born Again phenom. She'll describe the veteran's teammate, the

guy with the shock of blond hair and the thick waist who'll scream for each pitch from the dugout steps while his fellow pitcher on the mound remains stoic, poised. This will be the guts of her story: yet another example of her trademark, her ability to zero in on something no one else is looking at and write about it in a way that makes the words after her name seem earned.

The story will sing out of her laptop, the words taking shape across the screen in rapid fashion, her fingers moving as if she were on deadline, which she won't be, and when she is done, when the words are perfect, when every adjective is in place, when every metaphor has been trimmed and shined until each is both unexpected and true, she will press "No" when she is asked "Do you want to save Document 1," and the words, so ideal, will vanish from the screen.

"I'll make you a deal."

Mathers is in her seat, and Rachel feels the sigh come out of her nose as she shifts her weight from one foot to the other, her feet in black slides and not in sneakers or Docs like they should be, since it's snowing in Chicago, and three or so hours from now she'll have to fight her way through the frozen mass of humanity, bodies crowding O'Hare with their carry-on bags and their laptop cases and their duffle bags full of dirty laundry, with her toes bare, unprepared for the slush and the sludge of the cab stand.

"Does the deal involve the window seat?"

"Not likely." He blocks the row with his massive body, and Rachel sighs again, this time from her mouth. "It's about this."

Her purse is in his hands, the big old leather bag fashionable a half-dozen years ago, at least according to the friend who sent it to her on the first night of Chanukah.

Rachel, tired of standing, tries to edge her way out of the aisle, but even in roomy first class, his thick legs block any sort of forward progress.

"I'll move," he says, hoisting up her leather bag. "If you let me look through this."

"Are you nuts?"

"What, are you afraid I'll find out your darkest secrets?"

"Not likely." Lipstick, wallet, seven flattened Luna bars, a dozen pens, three scratched tubs of Carmex, a crumpled Cubs hat, a copy of *Moneyball*, a program from Ft. Meyers, a box of tampons, three contact lenses, a broken pair of sunglasses, a postcard from her nieces, a letter from her mom, the cord to her cell phone, half a piece of gum, and scattered pieces of paper – cocktail napkins, beer coasters, pages ripped from media guides, hotel stationery – covered with the same handwriting, a combination between the round script and the straight printed letters, formed for speed, keeping up with the racing pace of ballplayers' accents and her own lightning fast thoughts.

"I'll make it even." Tom lifts up the arm rest and slides to his left, taking Rachel's purse with him. "In the overhead compartment, there's a black carry-on. You give me access to this, and you can do what you like with that."

"You sure this is yours?" Rachel eyes the black bag –smaller than she would have imagined –skeptically, slumping back into her seat and slamming down the

armrest, grasping for any sort of distance between her stained khakis and his ironed jeans. "You sure you didn't grab Alou's bag just to fuck with me?"

"Look at the name tag."

"Mort Roberts?"

"My father-in-law. I can't exactly have Tom Mathers on my luggage tags. Look inside."

Rachel unzips the canvas bag, reaching first for the wallet and confirming identification. The driver's license is from the state of Illinois, his face caught between a smile and a grimace, the credit cards are platinum and black. Beside her, Mathers is rummaging through her purse.

"Hey, we're reading the same book."

"Big shocker. What'd you think?"

"It's a load of crap. Shoulda waited until Oakland actually won something with that approach before writing a book about it."

Even though she knows she'll find nothing interesting, nothing of value, nothing for the basis of a cover spread, Mathers' bag is still a disappointment. It could belong to any ballplayer, any man of a certain age: wallet, shaving kit, cell phone, the latest issue of *Sports Weekly*. She flips open to her spring training column, glancing quickly at the picture taken last fall, in the blue suit, her hair blown dry, her editor insisting that she let the photographer put makeup on her face, "elsewise, you're gonna look washed out, Matheson," before moving down to the words, satisfied with the way her thoughts look

in print, marching down the columns in straight easy paragraphs, long then short, long then short.

“Who are these?”

He’s got her wallet open, two pictures clutched in his hand, the purse dropped to his feet, forgotten – if she’s lucky.

“My nieces. Becca and Sandy. That one’s my nephew – he just turned two.”

“I thought you were an only child.”

“I am. The girls are my best friend’s daughters, and Joshua, he belongs to my cousin Eric. They just call me Aunt Rachel.”

“You like kids?”

“They’re OK.” The way Becca’s hair always smells like bubble gum ice cream, the feel of Joshua’s weight in her arms as she reaches him toward the ceiling, the sound of Sandy’s hysterical baby-laugh when she’s happy contradict Rachel’s words. “I mean, they’re more than that,” she amends, feeling a strange prick of guilt. “They’re amazing. At least to me. But I’m around them like, six times a year, so I always see them when they’re perfect.”

“Not like real kids.”

“No. I guess not.”

The Dodgers will be in a pennant race. The Angels will be in a pennant race. It will be barely summer, the long slow days of June just sliding onto the calendar, and already, the California teams prepare for October, for the crisp 80 degree winds that will

move through the Hollywood hills, causing the starlets lining Malibu beach with their horse-like limbs to reach for a gauzy piece of cloth for their shoulders.

Tom will stand in the on-deck circle, adjusting his batting gloves as the heaviness of the wooden bat, black and solid, rests against his thigh. His upper body will be massive in the black and grey road jersey, thickness everywhere, muscles that strain under the same reps he's done every day for two hundred lifetimes, things that might be good, things that may be good, but then again, there's a reason ballplayers die faster than anyone else, a reason these bodies break sooner than they should, tendons snapped, bones broken, nerves bent. He will feel it in every moment, every second of this season, this year he'll have that once it is over, pundits and ESPN analysts and big city writers will compare to Maris' in '61, DiMaggio's in '49, McGwire's in '98.

He will look up into the stands in this cavern that Disney built, beyond the swirl of the Rally Monkeys' brown and red fur, past the tanned faces and blonde hair and haloed hats, into the wide glass windows of the press box high above home plate, and Rachel will not be there, hunched over her laptop, reminded – as she always is whenever they are in the same ballpark on the same night – of his first at-bat, his size recalling fading black and white pictures of Lou Gehrig, of Hank Greenberg, of the way he faced off against Greg Maddux, taking a low slider first pitch, then watching an angry fastball just miss the outside corner of the plate, a fucking rookie staring down Maddux, getting him to throw the perfect hitter's pitch, straight down the middle of the plate, where Mathers slammed the shit out of it, sending it spiraling past the vine-covered wall of Wrigley Field.

There was talk of greatness, all the way back then, talk that slowed, then died, as season after season of average numbers piled up, talk rekindled by an occasional brilliant August, then dampened by a mediocre pennant-less September. Free agency, then a couple of trades, then free agency again, bouncing around the National League in cities like St. Louis and San Diego and Pittsburgh, shipped off for a half-season pennant race with the Rangers, then back in Chicago, to the White Sox, across town from where he started and where he thought he'd end it, to a city already in love with their favorites: a tall skinny kid who threw strikes like a trainwreck and a round fuzzy power hitter with a Dominican smile.

In this year, on this team, Tom will do what ballplayers have done before, and yet, it will feel like something entirely new, something different, something meant to mean more than anything ever has, a record that has stood for half a century, a record that seeps into the edges of pop culture, infiltrating song lyrics, capturing the attention of Presidents and producers, a record that evokes the iconic bloneness of a starlet still worshipped by the platinum heads who line Malibu beach.

Fifty-six straight games with a hit in each. If DiMaggio had gone just one more, he'd have signed an unfathomably large contract with Heinz. On this June day, with the sun bright and gold and the fans tan and tight, just miles from the house where Monroe took her last breaths, Tom – still months away from beginning his run at the record – will be thinking only of the end, the day when his body won't feel like it was slammed full on by the El, rumbling past the apartment in Chicago, Rachel's apartment, the one that will come, in just a few weeks, to feel less like a home and more like a prison.

“So you’ve got the great job now,” Tom begins, just as Rachel starts to jot down notes on the back of a Friendly Skies napkin, her pen leaving thick black marks around the blue outline of a cartoon plane. “What’s it mean? What are the perks?”

“Well, I get to fly first class all the time and be entertained by jerks like you.”

“Hey! I’m not a jerk. Asshole, maybe. Nosy bastard. But not jerk.”

“I stand corrected,” Rachel says, flipping the napkin around and trying to squeeze her letters so they’ll fit in the thin border.

“So, really, what’s the one big difference between senior baseball writer and whatever it was you were last season?”

Mathers has one of those faces where his eyes open right up, green as his shirt, and he looks at you as if he cares, really cares, what you’ll say. Rachel finds it disconcerting: she likes her athletes vague. Stupid. She doesn’t like this feeling, the one that can decide whether to answer honestly or ignore him. Either way she’ll feel as if she chose the wrong one, as if she made some sort of misstep.

“I get to pick my assignments,” she says plainly. “Giants-Dodgers. Sox-Yankees. Cards-Cubs. Wherever I want to be, whatever games I want to be at, I decide.”

“So where you going?”

“To start?” Rachel reaches for her purse, but then drops her hand. “New York. Seattle, then Arizona. I’ll hit the west coast before the end of the month – San Diego, maybe, or Anaheim.”

“And?”

Rachel decides not to look at him as she answers. "And what?"

"And that's it? That's all the perks you get for being senior baseball writer? No lackeys? No private jets? No sexual slaves? Wow, that's pretty shitty."

"Yeah, maybe to you. But for the first time in a dozen years, I get to decide when I get on a plane, and exactly where that plane takes me. You know what that feels like?"

"Actually," Mathers says, flipping through a magazine, "I don't."

In suburban Maryland, the rain will fall in torrents, big fat gushes of water coming from a clear blue sky and obliterating sight and perspective, distance and depth. July along the Washington/Baltimore corridor will be like every July: humidity seeping up from the thick black pavement that covers both cities, heat in sickening, slowing blasts moving upwards from the concrete.

The rain will come, like it does most afternoons, in splashes and not drips, as if from buckets and not sprinklers. It will be a warm rain, wet and blinding, hot on the skin, soaking hair already damp from the humidity, wetting clothes that have been limp for an entire season. The rain will wash away the visibility on I-95, on the BW Parkway, submerging the interstate roads connecting the two cities, drenching the rental cars, the airport shuttles, the taxi cabs driving north from the Baltimore-Washington Airport.

Baltimore is Rachel's professional home town. A summer internship with the *Sun* turned into a full-time job on the sports desk, taking calls from high school coaches on Friday nights, covering Maryland lacrosse and Towson soccer. Sometimes she tagged along to old Memorial Stadium with the beat reporters, helping the photo editor

during playoff games and running stats for the writers. The city is no longer the city she remembers, except for the heat: Baltimore will always be hot, sweating in her airless corner of a townhouse in a bad neighborhood before it fell victim to urban renewal.

The heat will always feel the same, and the rain will always feel the same. She will see this as she watches the tarp roll over the parched infield grass, matte black on yellow green, rain dotting the lens of the television cameras, fans clumped together in twos and threes under dark umbrellas, the green stands and the green seats and the red warehouse brick drenched and solid. She will watch the camera swing to the visitors' dugout, watch the man in the red pullover and the dark hair sitting alone, his body bent over, forearms on thighs, his face looking out across the puddle-splattered infield, past the "hit it here" signs, past the jagged outfield seats, past the empty picnic benches, in this backwards stadium, this turned-around field where the outfield faces in. Two years ago he was a god, traveled through the city like royalty, like every celebrity, every actor, every billionaire, every athlete, wrapped into one shining six-foot ballplayer. By the end of the month, he'll be traded, shipped off to a West Coast city while his former team catapults toward the postseason, better off without him. By the end of the season, his career will be over.

But in July, he won't know it, won't see his future in the dark storm clouds that block the Baltimore skyline. He won't think of his teammates in the clubhouse, won't think of the kids who spent eight hours in the back of the minivan, won't think about his rival in Chicago in the first days of his hitting streak, won't think of the reporter a thousand miles away, watching his face and slamming her fist against her laptop,

knowing she can't get the story she wants on a cell phone, knowing the job she's lived for, the job she's wanted all her life is slipping out of her grasp due to the same kind of shit luck that plagues the men she writes about.

All he'll know is that it's raining in Baltimore, and the game will not be played.

"This is your house."

"Bullshit."

"No really, look. That's your wife's name."

Rachel holds out the magazine, waving the thick pages in front of Mathers' face. His eyes had just begun to close, and she feels a secret thrill in waking him up, hoping she's bugging the piss out of him, as he's been doing to her all flight. She drops the magazine on his lap, and twists her head, trying to read the dials on his watch.

"Shit. Kay didn't tell me this was happening."

"You're full of it." Rachel leans over, turning the pages quickly. "Look, here you are, standing beside her on the back porch. And these blurry things must be your kids."

"Yeah, well, whatever." Tom closes the magazine, shoving it in the pocket in the seat in front of him. "It was just something Kay wanted."

She grabs the magazine, opening back up to the story. "A secluded rustic house, set on ten acres of wood, gives the Mathers privacy in their independent lifestyle. Who wrote this crap?"

"Obviously not the senior baseball writer for *Sports Weekly*. Not everyone can have your gift for perfect prose."

“Hey, that title was earned.”

“And the junior writers who talk about you around the urinal, bitching about who you fucked to steal their job, waiting for some dumb jock like me to wave his dick at you in the locker room, just dying for you to fail.”

Dave Mankewitz’s thick gin-breath, his mouth against her ear at the office holiday party two weeks after her promotion was announced, telling Rachel exactly the same thing, down to the last dick and the first fuck. Mankewitz may have been the only one dumb enough to say it to her face, but there were others. There were always others, at Northwestern, at the *Sun*, at the *Times*, at the *Sporting News*, in her own office, guys who’d pretend she was one of them, egg her on when she did her LaRussa impressions or her tirades against the Players’ Union, guys who’d drink too much and tell her she’s beautiful, she’s hot, she’s just as doable as the girls always waiting outside the locker room, desperation not quite hidden under the layers of makeup as they lean across the hotel bars.

They were all the same, no different than the men they covered, even when they put on their fancy suits and went on ESPN, using big words cribbed from their kids’ SAT books to describe salary caps and expansion teams and the designated hitter. She’d watched them collect the ballplayer’s rejects, buying expensive drinks and wiping Buffalo sauce off their faces before putting their thick hands on perfect thighs. Don’t tell my wife, they’d wink, as if Rachel were about to whip out her cell phone, as if she wanted to be one of the guys, and all she’d have to do was watch them try to score, try to be like the men these women really wanted to be with, and that’s when Rachel would

finish her vodka and head to the lobby, and wait for some rookie to spill his guts about missing home, missing his mom, missing his girl, hating the game, hating the road, wanting something, not something anyone else wanted, not something he had, but something he'd lost. There were always rookies who had too much to say. Always superstars sick of banging their heads against the locker, always pitchers unhappy with their defense, third basemen pissed about being stuck in the outfield, players being traded or players not being traded, and sooner or later, they always talked to Rachel. And she would listen, and then she would write.

September is when the city on the Charles changes, when U-Hauls and minivans line Commonwealth Avenue, when the BC kids and the BU kids crowd the Green Line and the Harvard and the Tufts and the MIT students fill the Red Line. It's September and the Sox will be in a playoff race and the Yankees will be on their way into town for a weekend series, and tee-shirts will scream "Yankees Suck" and "Jeter Swallows" and "Real Women Don't Date Yankees Fans" and "Cowboy Up" and "1918" and "Red Sox Rule." The national media will be in town, waiting for the Bronx to collide with New England, and some of them will wander over to Fenway to check out the rescheduled Thursday match-up against the Chicago White Sox from a rainout back in June, now the thirty-eighth day of the Streak, as it will be called, Mathers unsmiling in the visitor's dugout, the grey of his uniform an unwelcome contrast to the sharp September Fenway sun.

There will be things to talk about besides the Streak, but the Streak will be there, the Streak will echo off the Green Monster, the Streak will come out of Mankewitz's mouth as he corners Mathers in the locker room before the game, the one place and the one time when Mathers never talks to press, which Mankewitz knows, but the prick's trying to keep a job that isn't his, so he'll jam his tape recorder in Mathers' face like some rookie from the *Peoria Weekly Standard*. Rachel loves New England in September. He won't know where this comes from, won't be able to pinpoint the exact conversation, but he'll suddenly remember her face, her dark hair and her eyes, also dark, maybe, he can see the shape but not the color, her mouth red, not pink like his wife's, not orange from a lipstick tube, but red, deep red, as she talks about the foliage – bronze turning blaze outside Emily Dickinson's house.

Mathers will stand in the claustrophobic visitors' locker room and adjust his batting gloves, the socks and sweat of a century's worth of ballplayers stuck in his nose, and try to erase the urge to pull on his jeans, drop his uniform in the green trash can, and elbow his way into a cab. Every day, every goddamn day of the Streak, he will feel this way, feel his body slowly breaking into a hundred pieces, one slow tendon at a time, bones snapping, blood draining, muscles pulling apart.

He will have flashes of time – quick flashes, lasting less than a hundredth of a second – where he can't recall his daughter's name, can't reach out and grab the six letters, sound out the two syllables of the girl whose bones are made of his, and this makes him experience things he cannot name. He will be in Boston, the Fenway grass cold and green, the stands loud and old, fans and reporters and players together, all

thirty thousand of them crammed into this bandbox of a ballpark, sharing one consciousness that despite all its parts, cannot come up with the goddamn name of his goddamn daughter.

Rachel will be home – still home, always home. She'll be several pounds heavier than she is now, sharp edges gone to curves, biceps filling out, muscles gone soft, and she will be nearly crazy – no, she'll be long past crazy. She'll be resigned. She'll have quit crossing days off her calendar with a big black Sharpie, even though the months have turned to weeks, and the weeks are now almost days. The Sharpie will be dry. She will watch fall come to Chicago from her balcony window, the leaves drifting off her neighbor's plants, the weird sort of blue the sky becomes in September, so different than the bright light August one, and she'll think of Fenway, of Wrigley, of U.S. Cellular and Bank One and Comerica and SAFECO.

She will pick up her cell phone, and for the thirty-eighth day, she'll dial the same number, her fingers hitting individual buttons instead of scrolling the list or even pressing redial, punching them in, ten numbers that have become something she'll not want to name, something that can't be helped, only felt.

Mathers will run out of ways to ignore Mankewitz, his brain repeating Jayden, Jayden, Jayden, and his hip will start to buzz, right next to his crotch, the vibrating sensation of his cell phone and Mankewitz's clam chowder breath and his daughter's name and a thousand years of baseball history all pressing on his skull as his fingers tear apart and he'll turn away, and pick up the phone.

"I'm dying here," someone will say.

The little plates in first class are made of china, real china even, maybe, Rachel thinks, holding up one above her face, dumping the dinner roll off in the process, and squinting at the center, the scratched dull white surface. You're supposed to see the light through fine china. Or maybe you're not, maybe it's opaque. Rachel sees nothing, despite the rays of white, despite the brightness of the overheads, despite the sharp round glow coming straight down from above.

"So you never told me why you hate your father."

Mathers reaches over, grabbing the dinner roll off her tray, breaking it open and slathering it with butter before popping it, whole, into his mouth.

"Hey – you didn't even eat yours yet."

"Yours looked better. Stop avoiding my questions."

"Stop eating my food. As for my dad – I don't hate him. I never said I hated him."

"You didn't need to – I'm brilliant."

"You hit a fucking ball for a living."

"And what's more brilliant than that?"

Rachel sighs, poking at the salad with her fork, lining up her cucumbers in a row on the far left side of her dinner tray. Tom picks them off, one by one, his large fingers now sticky with Ranch dressing rubbing against her wrist.

"Anyway, hate would imply caring. And I never knew my father well enough to care about him – so, no, indifference, maybe. But not hate."

“Aren’t you grateful?” Tom has put down the cucumbers, and stares at her with an intensity that makes Rachel move back and forth, adjusting her shoulders within the confines of the airplane seat.

“Grateful for what?” Beyond Tom’s shoulder, Rachel imagines she can see the Midwest, the uniform stripes on green and gold lined up like perfection, a child’s game, a parquet floor.

“For this. This life. Come on – without your dad – without his name, his connections, his genes, you wouldn’t be this. Doing this.”

Rachel lets out a noise that falls somewhere between a snort and a laugh, a noise intended to show all her disdain, all her disgust, and only her disdain and disgust.

“You’ve got it wrong, Mathers.”

“Which parts?”

“All of ‘em. Everything.”

“Say it.”

She turns back to her dinner, digging her knife into a steak that’s surprisingly well cooked. The plastic knife bends precariously as she slides it through the meat, juices everywhere, spilling down the tray and rolling onto the front of Rachel’s white shirt. She grabs for a napkin, but finds it’s already missing; she snatches the one of Mathers’ lap and begins to dab and rub at the stains running in a small pattern down the middle of her chest.

“Say what?” She is finally done with her shirt, back eating her steak, placing the question between bites of broccoli and meat, broccoli and meat.

"Tell me to fuck off."

She wipes her mouth with Tom's napkin, then leaves it balled up on top of her plate where it soaks up gravy, brown bloodstains forming at the corner of the Friendly Skies logo.

"I can't do that."

"Why?"

She watches ice rattle around in an empty glass, his thick hands grabbing cold crystal. She forgot to count how many mini-bottles of clear liquid he's emptied into the ice, gin or vodka or even tequila, sloshing out of the small plastic bottles and onto the glassy mounds of frozen water. She weighs her words before she speaks, wondering if there's even the slightest chance he's buzzed enough to forget this conversation someday when she needs him, someday when she's dying for something, anything from his mouth, words she'll then be able to spin into gold, but it's too late for that, he's pushed it too far, so she speaks.

"You want to know if I hate my dad because you want to know – no, you need to know – when your daughter will start hating you."

"Jayden?" His laugh is forced, the first false move he's made all flight. "Jayden loves me. I'm a god to her."

"She's five. She'll get over it."

Tom is silent, looking down at his hands as they move uneaten pieces of food, of meat, around his plate with the silver-painted plastic fork.

“So, hypothetically, let’s say you’re right. You’re not, you’re full of shit, but let’s say, hypothetically, you’re right. So tell me this – which is worse? A daughter who hates you, or a daughter who’s –what’d you say? -- indifferent to you.”

The tray in front of her is whisked away by nimble hands, and Rachel slips her feet out of her slides and crosses them under her knees, drawing herself upward in the airplane seat. She watches the blue uniform swish past, trays disappearing from sight, and she counts them – fourteen – and tucks her toes into the angles of her legs.

When she answers, she does so without turning her head away from the aisle, keeping focused on the stewardess’ beige shoes and not looking at Tom’s face. “You’ll have to ask my dad that question.”

“Fuck you, Rach – he’s dead.”

Rachel lets herself smile, lets her head turn enough so that Mathers will see the look on her face. “Then I guess you’re out of luck.”

She will miss the summer. Completely, fully, the entire season will have come and gone without her, a summer of night games and day games, West Coast swings and East Coast stays, ballparks under stars, ballparks under domes, ballparks with waterfalls in the outfield walls, with hot tubs and hotel rooms overlooking the fields, ballparks sponsored by Pepsi and Cialis, metal gates, metal seats, plastic chairs, press boxes wide open above the field, crowded into the rows behind home plate, looming forward, upward, always looking down on the players, always above them, as if the sportswriters were underscoring their point.

The smells will be what she notices first as she winds her way through the concrete tunnels through Comiskey Park – gingerly, careful of walking, leaning on walls and not arms, not even Mankewitz’s, especially not Mankewitz’s, even though he is there, waiting for her to fall. It’s sweat and mustard and people packed close together, a sold-out crowd even though the days left in the season will have dwindled down until they can be counted on two hands and the White Sox are twenty-seven games out of first place. Some will say it’s ironic that this is the day she comes back to the ballpark, but it won’t be irony, rather, something she will have worked so damn hard for all season, something that she will have known since August, known she will be there for, knowing even then that game fifty-seven would actually happen.

So will game fifty-eight, and fifty-nine, and sixty, and sixty-one, but the one that will matter, the one that will count, will be game fifty-seven. Mathers will be at the plate in the second inning making contact with a bat the height of his daughter, a clean single to left center. but that will come later, much later, because first he will stare at the concrete walls, he will retch as if he’s vomiting but nothing will leave his mouth, his stomach, except the awful choking sounds, bouncing off thick slabs of silver and black, and he will know the last thing he should do is walk out onto that field, if he does, he’ll lose something forever, something he cannot name.

He will find Rachel – his wife, his daughter, his sons from his first marriage and their mom and her new husband, his parents, his brother, his childhood best friend, his agent, his high school coach, sixteen former teammates, four former managers, forty thousand White Sox fans will be there, but he will look for Rachel – the somewhat hot,

sometimes bitchy reporter whose life is way more fucked up than his own, at least on the surface, because she's the only one out of all of them who'll know what he means when he says he can't do it, can't be what the numbers say he's supposed to be.

He'll get it wrong. He will always get it wrong, forget to realize that behind the pretty face she is the same as anyone else, the same as him, and she'll need something to hold onto and when he reaches it out to her – willingly, without her asking – she'll grab onto it with both hands, and it will save her life. At least, it will feel like it's saving her life, at least to her, at least on that day, that fall day, at the tail end of a season that will have been both everything and nothing, a season that will begin on the same plane, in the same row, at the same pair of seats up in first class, the rarefied air changing everything, but especially that day, that fall afternoon in Chicago, when Mathers will give and Matheson will take.

The minute the fasten seatbelts light clicks off, Rachel is up, rubbing Carmex on her chapped lips, shoving her cell phone back in her purse, swinging her carry-on and her laptop case over her shoulder and pushing past the venture capitalists and the Fidelity vice presidents and the young couple carrying honeymoon hangover on sunburned faces.

The flight attendants are as solicitous as they've been all flight, guarding the passage way between first class and steerage, chirping their cheerful good-bye nows between the just-open cockpit and the gangway, sending off Rachel as she steps between

the two realms, plane and not plane, where she is blasted with an immediate, shocking cold she can feel all the way down to her toes.

The long stretch ahead of her is empty, vacant, a thin grey metal passage between air time and ground time serving as a decompression chamber of sorts whose purpose is to shake off the abnormalities of flight and allow the passengers to adjust to real time again, her apartment off Michigan Avenue with the view of the Lake, Shabbat at her mother's house in Rosemont, her office, her own office, glass walls on all four sides, a desk from where she can see everything and everyone, the pictures she has framed, of her mom on her wedding day in a pink suit on the steps of the LA City Hall, of nieces and nephew, of Rachel standing between Ted Williams and John Updike, frames lined up and neat, the people she wants to remember most pointing toward her as she works.

Behind her – on a glass wall, facing out – is the picture everyone asks about, the picture everyone looks for, of her dad, her father, Jacob Matheson, hoisting his baby daughter above his head as champagne spills down on his first NBA championship. The one in her office isn't the one that was the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, or the one in *Life* magazine; it's the original print, the one that hung in her dad's study her whole life, reminding her every day of just how her father thought of her – this tiny, perfect, unformed thing, barely bigger than a basketball and far, far less important.

"Why do you do it?" Tom's voice echoes out behind her, breaking the air vacuum silence. His quick strides catch up with her effortlessly, and she hears him, feels him approach her, almost directly behind her, his voice holding something she can't

name, something she can't touch, but can feel it grabbing onto the air around her, making it harder for her to breathe.

"Why do you do it?" The voice repeats. "Why do you fucking do it?"

There isn't an answer, there aren't words to use, not from Rachel Matheson, the woman whose ability to string words together has won her national awards; just as there are no words in response to her mother's constant refrain of "Why can't you settle down/find a nice Jewish boy/give me some grandchildren/find a real job," she has no answer for this as she hurries her steps, faster, faster, staying ahead of Mathers, not looking behind, not watching if he's following her, but feeling his breath almost reaching her skin propelling her forward, out into the airport, into the spring bustle of O'Hare, her feet now icy in her black slides, slipping through the packed crowds on tacky blue carpet, hearing the words that will not form, hoping he's not behind her, thinking not about what's she running from or to, missing the signs, the literal ones, placed too low, written too small as her lawyers will one day argue, her slides slipping out from under her, the broken escalator giving out, and she will be falling, freely, through the air of O'Hare and her last coherent thoughts will be of Anna Wimple stepping off her penthouse balcony, of a small white orb leaving the bat of Tom Mathers, and Rachel will say to herself as her body hurtles downward on its way toward reconnecting with earth, *so this is what it's like to know how to fly.*

The Seventh Inning: The Ballpark

There's blonde hair, then there's not. There's smooth skin, miles of it, creamy and elastic, giving but firm, and then there's not. There's burgundy polish on natural tips, then there's not. There's husbands, stepchildren, dogs, then there's not. There's a big yellow house with a wraparound porch on the corner of Darling and James, and then there's not.

Of all the things Norah has lost, the house is the latest, the one whose absence echoes in her heart, in her stomach, like a bad meal, fried clams instead of the mandarin salad, slamming around and up against empty insides. Remnants of the other lost artifacts, evidence of memories, wedding bands, photographs taken at the beach, silver filigree hairclips, the letters Y-A-Z peeling off the once-blue water bowl, all proof of an absence, smoldering in a pile of nothingness, reduced to a hole on the corner of Darling and James, the latest, longest, and most familiar address, the only one that's been truly hers, not inherited, not co-habited, not rented.

Seven is supposed to be lucky, the luckiest number of all, but in the seventh year of this seventh house, the house is gone, taking with it everything except the ridiculous yellow suit and the cream shoes that pinch her toes and underwear she can't remember and whatever happens to be in the trunk of her car – a blanket, last year's running shoes, a windbreaker, a blue leash, an empty bottle that once held water, a paperback copy of *Shoeless Joe*, the program from last week's Ocean Pines Bats game, a briefcase containing the dreams and hopes of a dozen or so strangers eager to leave all that's familiar, deposits for tourist excursions to Madrid and Venice and Medjugorje recorded in small neat script already unrecognizable, belonging to the woman who once lived at the corner of Darling and James, a woman who apparently no longer exists.

There is a suitcase. How could she forget the suitcase? Clothes for a week. Dirty, though, and no washing machine. Does Ocean Pines have a laundromat? Norah has never had the need to ask that question before.

And there's Teddy. The most important of things comes back last. Using his canine powers of instinct or smell or whatever it is that keeps dogs away from danger, he'd sought refuge in the neighbor's yard sometime before the explosion occurred, and now joins her slowly, an unfamiliar rainbow-colored ribbon around his neck, bearing witness to the absence before them. Later, she'll be told that it was a faulty gas valve, a freak of nature, so lucky no one was in the house when it burst, then disintegrated completely. The hole is smoldering, really, one of those wonders of physics where something can look like nothing after such a small passage of time. No wreckage. No piles of ugliness, no burnt skeletons to suggest anything at all was once here. Nothing

unpleasant to block the vista, a tree-lined street of reaching oak trees, a Southern street near the ocean, smelling of warmth and water and sweetness, a Southern street, a Southern street, a street so full of the South and what it means to be in the South and packed with the South that it's inseparable from centuries of connotation weaved tightly around perception.

The infield grass is green, bright and unidentifiable as any other shade of green, metaphors lacking, falling short of actual description, other than infield grass green. Her eyes thirst for the familiar tint, her nose longs for the scents steaming up off the hot surface – the smell of baseline paint as it is sprayed along the diamond, bright white against the almost-maroon dirt, of fresh clippings that border the edge of the pitcher's mound, waiting for the painstakingly careful hands of high school boys to sweep it away, of new leather gloves drenched with oil.

Without a house, this is now her home. Closest thing to it, she thinks. She came directly here from the insurance agency, explaining to Sela in the ticket office her season pass had been destroyed along with everything else she owned, and she was escorted to her regular box seat halfway between home plate and first base with a "don't worry about it, dear," the ticket girls all recognized her anyway, but it felt strange not to hold that square piece of cardboard in her hand.

The game hasn't started, wouldn't for another hour, but Norah couldn't think of anywhere else she should be. Here at the ballpark, where she'd spent 38 evenings and weekend afternoons every summer, from June through September, soaking up the one

thing that'd ever made any sense to her, a feeling that continued to haunt her here, in her seat, row C, seat 1, section 101, Teddy outside, waiting for her, on the account that he didn't much like baseball, and baseball didn't like him.

Around her, the seats are empty, except for the kids, goddamn kids with their runny noses and ice cream flying everywhere, dropping mustard-side up hot dogs on cream walking shorts for a fly ball twenty feet over their skinny outstretched arms. Rarely a "sorry, ma'am," all these kids, growing up so close to the ocean, so spoiled by these perfect days, these golden nights, no adversary, just sun-drenched perfection. Blame the parents, she thinks. If the children are rotten, it must be the parents' fault. That's what Edward always said. It's kind of funny, now, after how things turned out. Norah can't imagine Edward taking credit for his own children's rotten behavior, not that he'd ever seen it, on account of they waited to show their blackest selves only after Edward was buried under the leafiest tree in Cohasset, next to his first wife, both their names carved into granite, at a peace never quite achieved in life.

Edward, gone forever, with the house. In the living room, on top of the piano, brushed silver frame, Edward on their wedding day, in the neat black suit, holding the loose gathering of flowers that served as her bouquet; on the wall running up the staircase, the black and white head shot, selected from dozens taken in an afternoon for the back of the investor relations brochure – his assistant eventually overruled her choice, but sent a copy of the one of Edward caught between a laugh and a smile, his face uncharacteristically vulnerable; and Edward how she remembered him the most: on

the beach, bare legs, scuffed loafers, his grey-white hair unkempt, looking older without his Armani and Lauren, yet paradoxically younger, too, in the gold frame kept facedown in the dresser top drawer. All three images, and uncountable others, buried in boxes, packed in photo albums, the heavy black scrapbooks from his childhood Norah always believed she'd send to Kaleb or Grace once she could forgive or at least forget, all destroyed, all those pictures of Edward, who'd been gone for so long, she used to trace his features with her fingertips as the gap between their years grew thinner, waiting to catch up to him, waiting until the number of lines on her face reached the number on his, until they were at last the same age, a dozen years had passed, he, still sixty, and she, just fifteen years away, she'd been close, and now, now, now she'd never make it.

There's money, so much money. She wonders if this is how lottery winners feel, or first round draft picks, holding a check for the very first time. She's in the unnaturally cool office belonging to her lawyer, the yellow suit not quite a perfect fit, bought in Charleston while her house disappeared, suddenly the only suit she owns, no time to tailor it to her curves and height the way she usually does, hem riding above her knee, almost like a miniskirt, as she shifts against the strong-smelling leather grabbing onto the backs of her legs. There are documents in front of her. Strange, thick piles of documents, printed on expensive bond paper. In front of her, on the mahogany desk, her whole life reduced to numbers, decimal points, dollar signs, the settlement from the house packed together with Edward's life insurance, small inheritances from all the relatives that went before her, with the money offered to Kaleb and Grace, then turned

down, right alongside the funds they wanted, the basis of the lawsuits, all that money added up, a literal price tag attached to the long years of her life stretching all the way up to this very moment, here, in this staid and beige office of leather and wood.

Reaching out with her left hand, Norah moves the papers aside, the fresh ink tattooing her fingertips, page after page, until the one she wants is uncovered. The name of her company is bolded, her name below it, assets, gross profits, expenses, all tallied up by some accountant somewhere not here, neat computer-generated numbers, all of them trumped by the scrawled green numbers circled at the bottom of the page.

“Does the offer still stand?” She’s surprised at how steady her voice is, on the brink of finishing what Kaleb and Grace began and the explosion continued, but there’s a certain calmness, an excitement in her stomach at the idea of completing this action, lumping all the numbers in together, swelling and merging, and like the ocean she used to watch from the third floor bedroom, the waves threatening to overpower the thin strip of land, burst over the crumbling concrete, water taking over the town in an unavoidable outcome.

Her lawyer is surprised, too. Lips form a perfect “oh,” several minutes of “are you sure” and “this isn’t the right time” and “why don’t you sleep on it” and “so much change” and “you can’t possibly spend what you have” but the more the protests rain down from the pursed solid mouth, the more Norah smiles.

All the numbers, all that money together, and she suddenly knows why, realizes that everything she has lost and everything she has gained was marching toward this very moment, the moment where she’d look at her life and face nothing but ink, literally

piles of money, so much of it, in front of her, hers, all hers, this plus what she'd get from the chain anxious for an established link into the Outer Banks, former disdain leads to gratefulness, and the travel agency business Norah had built on her own, putting her heart and her good years and her Friday nights and Sunday mornings and blood, plenty of blood, from paper cuts to the less tangible kind, is already liquidated, gone in her mind, added to the numbers on the top sheet of paper to her left.

She allows herself to smile. Then laugh. She can hear the ocean, just blocks from here, pounding away at the flimsy man-built barriers, unaware of their fragility in the face of nature, the power of the inevitable, and on some level she knows it's not really the waves penetrating concrete and steel and the sealed hum of central air, knows on some level it's low tide, the waters are calm, blue, inviting, lapping at the thighs of a hundred tourists' daughters, and the rush she hears is only inside her, inside her heart, inside her head, the byproduct of the monumental idea formulating in her consciousness.

There is all this money. And for it, she has a plan.

Before Edward, there was Jon. Her first wedding band was gold, thin, fourteen dollars from the tattered dusty iron-barred brick-front jewelry store in the South End, decades before the South End was someplace a woman like Norah could walk alone. Her first wedding was the one her family was invited to attend, mother in lavender chiffon, father in light blue seersucker, butterfly collars, Jon in a suit, perhaps, she can't really remember if it was a suit or a tuxedo, if he had groomsmen or just his brother, it

was so long ago, she was so young, and probably high. She has vague memories of a shared joint for breakfast, maybe capped with one of the several bottles of champagne, refuting the rumor that she had to be pregnant – started by Jon’s aunt, she suspected – to marry so young.

She hadn’t kept much from those years with Jon. There wasn’t ever much worth keeping. The ring, she found it maybe five years ago while looking for her mother’s comb and brush, buried in a box as if it one day just fell off her finger. She held it in her palm, tarnished and dull, no longer a perfect circle, the cheap metal having bent during the ensuing years. She walked the ring downstairs from the attic and to the closet in the guest room where her jewelry boxes were lined up, placing it beside earrings and bracelets she’d never wear again, near but not next to the box containing Edward’s engagement ring.

Every Thursday, she has lunch at the Briar Box Café with women she knows, business acquaintances more than friends, and even with her house, her business, she does her best to direct the conversation away from herself, and it turns, as it often does, toward lost loves, the women placing their chins on their bridged hands straight from central casting of Southern Women of a Certain Age, letting memories unfold.

“The boy I met the summer of my sweet sixteen on Myrtle Beach.”

“I spent every history class staring at the neck of our high school quarterback, and he never ever knew my name.”

“The first boy I kissed looked exactly like James Dean. He was from the wrong neighborhood, and we would sneak kisses under the bleachers until my parents found out. They forbade her from ever seeing him again.”

Through these stories, Norah thinks of the man who left emotional scars as deep and as red as the physical ones, knowing that somewhere, he, too, in a place she’ll never see, walks around with identical marks burning his skin, his soul, welts that can be covered, glossed over, all but forgotten, but won’t ever heal.

“What about you, Norah?” Someone asks.

She looks down into the depths of her coffee cup. “Oh, no one special,” she lies. “Edward was my first love.”

Summer is perfect in this square footage in this town in this state, in this jagged part of the world. Norah wears bright pants, thin, cool against her skin, pants she never would have bought before all her clothes were destroyed. She doesn’t know if she should call them pink or salmon or something else, but she likes how they look against the blue metal of the rows, her feet in improbably white espadrilles on the back of the seat in front of her. Over her toes, the players stretch out, uniforms a crisp pre-game clean, white on a lush green field, like the white of her shoes on the deep navy chair. She wears a hat, tipped back, and large sunglasses that hide much of her upper face, and pink lipstick. All three are new, bought in yet another shopping expedition. Every day she wakes in the stiff, unfamiliar sheets of the tourist hotel and remembers something

else she needs to get through the day. A black bra, flea powder for Teddy, socks, Blistex, sun block, that book she read by Robert Girardi a dozen years ago now out of print.

She thinks of the ballparks of her youth – McDonough Field, where her brother’s Little League and high school teams played, three diamonds bordered by shared bleachers and a small concession stand, two quarters for a strawberry éclair on a stick, bleachers where she sat beside her mother, watching Alexander (killed in Vietnam) in his pitcher’s uniform, a striped shirt and grey-white stirrups from the Play It Again Sam store on Route One. From McDonough, Norah went straight to Fenway Park, a leap so huge and all encompassing it was like experiencing the best extremes in baseball in just one five mile excursion made from the backseat of the family Plymouth. Fenway Park between her brother and her father, men whose features are even more faded than Edward’s in her memory, blurry against the strong images of the great green wall, the painted “No Pepper” signs, red stirrups, Jim Rice and Freddy Lynn the Gold Dust twins, balls hit to the outfield gap between Dewey and Armas, balls hit to the infield, Tony C diving past second to grab a sure double away from Reggie Jackson, balls hit to the Green Monster, caroming off the dense wall and into Yaz’s glove, balls hit at players, balls hit beyond players, balls hit back into the stands, where her brother reached his worn glove above her head, always empty, never catching one of those elusive foul balls.

Later, Fenway was where she went with Jon, the New Yorker, fights in the stands, the woefully bad teams of the early eighties, followed by the surprise of the suddenly good teams of Clemens and Boggs, Barrett’s hidden ball trick, two runners

sliding into second from opposite directions but both miraculously remaining safe, Gedman at the plate, Henderson in California, chanting “Daaaar-yl” in the bleachers on that rainy October night, snorting coke in the bathroom during the seventh inning stretch, Jon hurling the cup of beer at her back on the T ride home after the Sox beat the Mets, Norah yanking him by the hair in the kitchen, the thin sharp German engineered knife held first at her neck, then his, then back to hers, slipping through the skin below her collarbone, a notch just beyond all the previous levels of violence between them, an escalation jolting Norah into a strange sobriety, into a realization that her marriage was actually over.

Four days later, the Mets won the series and Jon apologized with a puppy, who Norah named Yaz after her favorite ballplayer. The puppy, a soft black lab with white paws, the first ever pet Norah held, licking her face, panting and wriggling in his puppy-like way, was enough to save Norah, but not nearly enough to save Norah and Jon. They each stuffed a suitcase full of half of what was worth carrying out of the apartment, and left Boston in separate directions – she went east, to the dunes of the Cape, renting a small house, going to school, working as a waitress at the country club where Edward golfed on summer weekends. He went west, past Worcester, past the Berkshires, well out of Massachusetts, through New York and Pennsylvania and the Midwest, stopping somewhere, she supposed, in the vast flatlands that stretched between the coasts, moving far away from the ocean Norah clung to, wisely avoiding water girls who clashed so much with Jon, the oil-minded boy.

It was years before she returned to Fenway again, this time with seats in the new boxes built high above the field, seats with air conditioning and attendants and television sets, seats with balconies that one stepped onto into the humid air for an inning or two of skybox baseball. Edward always dressed for these games, so Norah did, too, eschewing shorts for dresses like the ones Julia Roberts wore in *Pretty Woman*. Norah's secret from her Edward years was a reliance on the silly prostitute film for fashion tips – rich fabrics, subdued colors, polka dots, expensive heels – when what she really wanted was to throw on a pair of Keds and an off-the-shoulder sweater like Susan Sarandon in *Bull Durham*.

It was worth it, however, to put aside her clothes and her thoughts and sit quietly beside Edward, trading in the frenzy of Jon and the bleachers for the calm sterility of her second marriage.

The thing was Edward – older than her father, with children older than Norah – in his world of regattas and box seats so far removed from the walk-up apartments and T rides of hers, knew the turmoil and the rage, the sudden dark ugliness that passion when boiled can become. Edward's calm face and kindly eyes kept his darkest secret, revealed only to Norah: the happiest day of his life was the day his first wife died. Her passing signaled the end to decades of living with someone who despised him, of hidden scars, of wearing a mask for his friends, children, associates in order to pass as "normal," to hide the combustion between him and the woman who by the end of her life had hated him with all her heart.

Beneath the clothes and the age and the respect, Edward was really the same as Norah: burned, charred bits of something incomplete. They lived by the ocean in Edward's home, letting the waves do all the raging.

Norah walks through the downtown streets of her adopted Southern town, the one she found on her own after Edward's sudden death, after his children showed up with their suitcases full of anger, paperwork and accusations – which, alongside of the loss of her beloved husband – shattered the inner quiet she had worked so hard to obtain. In the face of their assault, she fled, following the coastline south until she settled here, the sun-drenched town which wore many faces: tourist haven with its bed and breakfasts, college town of coffee houses and beer specials, refuge for city drifters, bastion of Southern gentility with roots stretching back centuries. Bits and pieces reflecting the mosaic of its residents make up the main street leading from the ballpark to the ocean, self-conscious boutiques with their doors and windows flung open, brightly-colored dresses blown out toward the street by clunky air conditioners.

At the travel agency, she stops in front a hand-lettered sign in the window announcing the company's new affiliation. The carved blue and gold sign above the door still hangs in place, and the pictures in the window are the ones she hung herself. Her key no longer works, and she knows her business cards on the receptionist desk have been replaced. It's strange to see the store be half hers, half not: she expected all or nothing, not this peculiar combination of familiar and unknown. She wants to be on the

other side of this feeling, stepping into something new, not leaving something behind. She's always leaving, always closing doors, watching things crumble. The last man she took to bed she told to stay away, and he did. Eventually he did.

She turns away from her old business, and steps toward her new one. She wants it to be done, be over, for the paperwork to be complete. She's impatient with the process, itching and scratching, like Teddy on the leash in front of her, his small legs trotting down the sidewalk, black like his predecessor's, but stubby, short, never grown. When she found Teddy at the pound, he was still a puppy, and no one knew he wouldn't ever not be one; years later, the miniature black lab still stops college kids, babies in their tracks, his coat no longer the shiny jet black of his puppyhood, but a dull shade of a sweater washed too many times.

Here, outside the old, she thinks of the new. Her lawyer tended the offer; the approach was made and the paperwork filed, but in order for a decision to be completed, the current owners wanted to sit down with Norah first. She was hoping to avoid this step. She couldn't imagine answering any questions, giving solid reasons other than the most simple – it's something she's always wanted, from the time she was young, sitting beside her mother at McDonough field fiddling with the hairclips that once belonged to Grandma Rose, then in the bleachers at Fenway, through the dozen long summers with the Bats here in Ocean Pines, the small town just south of Wilmington, North Carolina.

The hairclips – it's funny that she always thinks of them in relation to baseball, remembering her mother fastening the thin and delicate silver barrettes into her then-

blond hair from the weathered, splinter-inducing bleachers. Norah's sure she received them in a different time and place, and she should have memories of an Easter dress or a Sunday morning, but they are lost, replaced only by the solid image of her mom's tanned fingers slapping away her own when she fiddled with the clips one too many times. Decades have passed since the clips fit right, yet she tried, every so often, to pull them off, silver against grey. They lived on her dresser, among the perfume bottles and the fingernail polishes, tarnished but still beautiful, waiting to be placed in some other little girl's locks.

The windows in the office – her office, or soon to be – are open, above the ballpark below. She looks at the grass, at the field empty of its ballplayers, left to the man with the hair tinged tobacco yellow shuttering alone between second and first with a worn green hose in his hands. She says the right things, or what she supposes are the right things – it's strange how the words come out in the order that they do, controlled by someone outside her, far away, someone who is not Norah. She is too grateful to want an explanation, trusting that somehow, sometime, she did something right, and the reward for that long-forgotten deed comes now, in the office, in front of the four people – men – in their dark summer suits, pastel short sleeve shirts, guarding the old man behind them, the only person in the room who remains seated, behind the mission style desk that Norah already imagines as her own, the litter of grandchildren faces already packed away in her mind.

"You won't make any money," he tells her, speaking for the first time. "You know that."

"I do." Left unsaid: I don't care. In the dozens of years since she's had it, money has ceased to lose true meaning.

"You have to do all sorts of ridiculous things to get people here. For purists like you, like me, like us, it can feel kind of..."

He trails off, his pause unfolding the countless garish promotions Norah has witnessed in her years as a Bats season ticket holder, the mini Elvis contest, the pay-your-weight entry, the pigs around the base path, the dance on the dugout disco night, the shave your head get a free ticket mess, the human ice cream sundae debacle, the short-lived giant wading pool beside the right field bleachers, dismantled after just three nights when an ill-timed leak caused bonus baby Rob Dawson to break his leg on a misplayed long fly ball.

"I know." Short declarative sentences, two words. Subject, verb. They've carried Norah through this afternoon, long and warm in her still-uncomfortable yellow suit, tugging the back of her skirt like a girl thirty years younger, a girl in an unfamiliar body, not quite sure of what is happening to the outsides or the insides, only sure of one thing, and that is the cool infield grass beneath her brother's capable feet, a small spinning orb traveling at a speed faster than sight, landing with a satisfied pop in a worn leather glove.

"It's not like we dreamed it would be." He speaks softly, his voice cracking, out of reach of the ears of the men around him, heard only by Norah. *It's not like you thought,*

he says with his sunken milky blue eyes, *it won't save you, it will give you only a taste of the magic, but you can't own it, none of us can, the game is still just a game, and it can't give you back what you've lost.*

"But it feels like it can," he says, his cracked lips turning up at the corners, and Norah sees that he's smiling at her. "And sometimes, the feeling is enough."

He motions for the papers, and the youngest of the suited men lifts a case off the floor, talking in that voice that clips instead of drips, the Southern accent of businessmen and moderate senators, the lilts of the new South, of a place of prosperity and sunshine and gentle acceptance of everyone and everything, a smoothness that erases centuries of negative connotations held with a firmly-grasped handshake. The papers, written by Norah's lawyer, signed by her hand in bold black ink, now turned by the ridged slow hand, his name above her own on every successive dotted line.

They all sit now, around him, around the papers that decide their fate, and sip sweet tea from plastic cups boasting the wingspan of the Ocean Pine Bat. Norah looks out at the field, down at the seat she's occupied every summer since she first came here, the blue metal scrubbed clean by last night's sudden rainstorm, the grit of the summer washed away from the surface, at least temporarily. The iced tea slides down her throat, the breeze from the ocean moves through the open windows, brushing once-blond strands of hair across her forehead, shaking the edges of pages signed slowly, subtracting the game from one life and transferring it to another. The corner of the office is the grandchildren's domain, a collection of toys bearing the Bats logo, a representation of the ballteam's giveaways, now possessions of the scrubbed round faces dotting the

room in acrylic frames. Norah can already see Teddy in that corner, the plastic pails and knickknacks replaced by a shaggy blue dog bed, a new water bowl, a handful of chew toys and rawhide bone, his favorite.

He is finally finished. He raises his pen from the last page with a dry choke, coughing out the last ownership of the team.

"It's yours, my dear." He stands, Norah stands, and the men with the suits stand. Handshakes are given, copies are distributed, briefcases packed up and shiny wingtip shoes move toward the door.

"Hold on a minute." When he speaks, they stop, just like their Southern mothers raised them twenty years ago, back when Edward was burying his wife with a secret smile, when Jon was slashing her shoulder with the second-to-largest kitchen knife. "Stay for the game."

It's an order, not a request, and Norah nods, stepping out of the way as the suits are dismissed and file out the door, navy following olive following navy following black. The old man pulls two chairs next to the window overlooking the field, and gestures to the chair beside him.

She sees the groundskeeper has left the diamond, and the stands now dotted with spectators, the quiet ballpark no longer still. Dark green and gold uniforms hover around the visitors' dugout, large tanned arms swinging multiple bats. In the outfield, the hometeam glides through calisthenics, stretching like an aerobics class and running light sprints in the now-setting sun. The smell of funnel cakes and spilled beer flavors the early evening air, mixing with sweat and pine tar and melting rubber. Voices bump

against each other, a full symphony of accents overpowered by the foghorn tones of the announcer, welcoming fans to Junior League literacy night. The ocean breeze grows heavier, carrying the taste of seaweed and salt, lifting the hair off shoulders of the fans filing in, faces tilted toward the field, away from Norah's view. The world has changed since the old man first picked up his pen, and the hours are lost to her forever. There's now nothing left to do but sit beside the old man in her worn blue leather chair, slightly smaller and less shabby than his own, rolled in front of the long low picture windows, the ballpark, her ballpark, open and alive.

The Eighth Inning: Keeping Score

Cat, lying face down on her burgundy and white striped bedspread, crying. Sobbing, really. Cat cried more as a teenager than her older siblings did as babies. The radio psychiatrists said mothers shouldn't compare daughters, but Isabelle couldn't help contrasting Cat, her fifteen-year-old hormones on full and constant display, with Rebecca, who at the same age had kept her emotions tightly bundled behind her bedroom door.

Isabelle stands in the doorway and watches her youngest child, ash blonde hair spread out in thick strands against the pillow sham, navy blue sweater heaving with each sob. When Cat cries, which is often, she does so with her entire body. Rebecca's posture had always remained straight, perhaps from years of dancing and soccer, and all memories of her son's form focus around Peter's graceful bend as he shot baskets in the driveway.

Cat, however – Cat was different than Isabelle's other children, to put it in the most simple way imaginable. Dramatic. Moody. Talkative. And always, always home.

“Cat, honey, come on. You’ve got to get moving – we’re going to be late for the ballgame.”

Her daughter doesn’t move. Isabelle sighs, checking her watch. She calculates the Saturday afternoon traffic in her head, wondering how long it will take for Cat to calm down, get over whatever tiny injustice makes her cry so hard.

“Mom, why do men suck so bad?” Her words, forced through tears, are muffled, stripped bare of emotion, and emerge from her throat like a croak.

Isabelle, from the doorway, looks at her hands, unsure of what she is expected to do with them. She’d had plenty of experience with “sucky” men, even excluding her ex-husband: Cat had witnessed the parade of suitors who’d arrived at the front door in the five years since her divorce, some with flowers, others just with middle-aged chips on their shoulder, manifested in receding hairlines, black BMWs, or a taste for first-date sex, messy and hurried and awkward and orgasm-free.

No comforting words come to mind. No phrases that would stop the tears, no kind bits of wisdom. Only an immense sense of exhaustion. Isabelle tries so very hard to suppress a yawn.

The summer Isabelle was seven, a major league baseball franchise moved to Baltimore, and her father announced he would no longer allow his lack of male offspring to prohibit him from enjoying traditional father-son activities. On a cloudy June day in 1954, he shuffled all six of his daughters, in their cream muslin skirts and thick black shoes, to the metal bleacher seats whitewashed by the sun in the back rows

of Memorial Stadium. The Ionelli girls all had similar coloring: auburn brown hair, green eyes, a smattering of freckles dotting their cool olive complexions. When looking at pictures from that first outing, Isabelle was reminded of Russian nesting dolls, popped open and lined up in a neat row.

High above the crowds of mostly men in their broad-brimmed hats with a scattering of wives, of children, she sat between her oldest sister Maria and her father as she watched the field below her with wide-open eyes. The men whose bodies moved so gracefully around the diamond, in perfect accord, sent a shiver through Isabelle's veins. They were all so big, with thick arms and broad backs, taking wide steps with their giant feet. She wanted a uniform just like the ones they wore, longed to feel thick woolen pants billow from her knees, a crisp shirt stretching against her skin. More than anything, she wanted to raise her hand to her nose as she slid a worn leather glove over her fist, inhaling its musky scent. She knew at that instant what she wanted to be when she grew up: a boy.

"Can I, Daddy, can I, please?" But her father was wiping Addie's nose, tying Annabelle's shoe, and holding Antonia's ice cream. Isabelle was left to kick the seat in front of her with her scuffed hand-me-down shoes. Around her was the smell of cooked meat and buttered popcorn, the slightly spicy odor of aftershave and the hint of freshly cut grass which wafted up from where the players stood in their perfect white uniforms, waiting for her to join them.

The pilgrimages to Memorial Stadium became a yearly event, Jeremy Ionelli impatiently chaperoning his daughters out of the house while his wife, when she was alive, enjoyed the rare day of having the house to herself. In the weeks following each June game, Isabelle hoped to prolong the connection she forged with her father over those nine innings, and would wait for him to return from work outside the stoop of the tall house well after the streetlights burned on and tell him the score of that afternoon's Orioles games. But with six girls to raise, her father rarely made it home before her bedtime. Isabelle's sisters never seemed to mind his frequent absences; without him around, they had much more success sneaking out in red lipstick and coming home after curfew from breathless dates. Even her mother seemed happier when her husband worked late, or traveled by train to Richmond, Philadelphia, Charlottesville, staying away for several nights at a time.

For her older sisters, the first Orioles home stand in June was a sort of penance for their freedom. They all went, dutiful daughters, elbowing each other for the end seat, scanning the crowd for boys they knew, playing with their hair ribbons and biting their lips, parched from the popcorn their father always bought, to give them color. Isabelle was the only one of the Ionelli girls who actually enjoyed these outings, or at least, that's what she always believed; confirmation of this was never affirmed, or even asked for. With her sisters all wanting to be as far away from his strict gaze as possible, Isabelle always got the seat to his left, was closest to his lectures illustrated with examples from the men on the diamond in their thick wool matching uniforms as

identical as the skirts the Ionelli girls were compelled to wear: symmetry, patience, cleanliness.

“I grew up in the ballpark,” Isabelle would say in her twenties, in her thirties, even though it wasn’t quite true; the once-a-year sojourns were just that. But in Memorial Stadium, Isabelle was what she always wanted to be, her father’s favorite, holding his scorebook between innings, telling him the uniform number of the player perched in the on-deck circle, the attentive one, the one who understood why it was they were at the ballpark and not at the zoo or the aquarium or on a boat around the harbor, erasing, for just one day, the regrets that plague a man who has only daughters.

The refrigerator in the house where Isabelle and Cat now live alone is covered with layers of papers, pictures, and newspaper clippings, the centerpiece of a haphazard kitchen. Announcements copied on high school letterhead, college grade reports, Orioles tickets, snapshots and studio portraits of three children through various stages of their lives: in soccer uniforms, Halloween costumes, dance outfits, graduation cap and gown.

Isabelle, having given up on her daughter, now stands in front of the testament to her failure at motherhood – what kind of woman allows her ex-husband to move her thirteen year old son across the country with only a sense of relief? – and listens to her daughter’s footsteps on the floorboards above her. The creak of the water pipes implies Cat is now recovered enough to wash the streaks off her face; Isabelle glances down at the clipping in her hand from the *Santa Monica Daily News*, at the last name they all share

in bold, commanding letters. It'd come earlier in the week with Cat's weekly letter from her dad; in the advent of email, Dan still sends an actual letter each week to his daughter in his distinctively neat handwriting, half-printing, half-cursive, the envelopes an indictment of Isabelle's own disastrous parenting skills.

"Mom, is this lipstick too orange?"

Cat's voice echoes down the staircase, demanding a response. Without looking down at the black and white photo of her son Peter at the foul line above several inches of column text, she tacks the clipping to the refrigerator on top of a photograph of her oldest daughter, Rebecca, on a boat on Lake Michigan, and turns toward the staircase.

Her mother's death came slowly, the most quiet, the least distinctive of the Ionellis fading away one cold Baltimore winter, never reaching the age Isabelle is now. Isabelle likes to imagine her own style of motherhood was predetermined, inherited from a woman too tired from six births in seven years to worry too much about raising her daughters. Her children, first Rebecca, then Peter, gravitated toward Dan, one of those hands-on fathers who insisted on family vacations and fishing trips and drives to the pony farm a hundred miles west, weekends devoted to the kids. Isabelle was a teenager, sixteen when her mother died, not the only Ionelli girl left at home, but one of the last few.

That year, Memorial Stadium was particularly cold, a wind blowing through the old creaky seats, and the Ionellis had nine seats instead of seven; for the first time, Maria and Addie were both allowed to bring dates, the name of the boy with the too-big knees

long forgotten. Will was the other, already planning a way to ask for Jeremy Ionelli's permission to marry his oldest daughter.

It was the first year Isabelle had competition for the seat beside her father, as he gestured to the two men, still boys, really, with their hair not quite combed right and ill-fitting suits, too formal for a ballpark in the middle of June, but required for this first introduction to the family patriarch. At the end of the row, Jeremy Ionelli elbowed through his daughters to take an arm of each of the young men, making sure they each took the seat on either side of him.

Isabelle will never forget the smell of charred meat from the hot dog vendor standing beside her, the sound of the crying toddlers behind her, the way her skirts rustled with the chilled wind blowing in over the diamond, off the cool green grass, the players already lining up around the bases, as she was shuffled into the row, between Annabelle and Antonia, away from the action, her father's voice, deep and reassuring, booming with an audible sense of relief.

Surrounded by her family, crammed in the middle of all her sisters, Isabelle watched that game alone.

Mud coating her shoes. Rainout? Unlikely, it was just a June shower. Six girls, now women, crowding into the stands, passing back and forth umbrellas and newspapers, holding children on their laps. Jeremy Ionelli, in the middle of it all, surrounded by grandchildren and sons-in-law and grown-up daughters, all married, except for Isabelle.

“What’s taking you so long to make Iz a McCovey?” one of her sister’s husbands teased Dan, who smiled and blushed, reaching for Isabelle’s hand. As soon as she could, she extracted her fingers back, busying them with her purse, her raincoat, the mud on her shoes, and her father, seated on her other side.

“Are you O.K., Dad? Do you have everything you need? Are you dry enough?”

“I’m fine, Iz.”

She imagined words that were not there, words that would solidify her place in the family. The words didn’t come, never would, but that was fine. She was content to watch the players splash through puddles on the field in front of them, their uniforms coated with mud and stained by the sky, from where the rain continued to fall on everyone, in the stands and on the grass, as if they were all equal.

“Mom, I can’t find my shirt.”

Isabelle realizes the inevitable, that she is now unable to avoid another trip up the stairs. She keeps her eyes from the clock in the hallway, unwilling to face the reminder that by now she planned to be turning onto the Beltway, well on her way to Camden Yards.

Cat isn’t in her bedroom; Isabelle finds her in the guest room, emptying the wide closet with the determination and regard for order of a looter.

“Honey, you have a million tops in your bedroom. What are you doing?”

“I want to find the Anderson jersey dad bought me a few summers ago, the one that was too big for me then. It should fit now.”

"Sweetie, Brady Anderson doesn't even play for the Orioles anymore."

Cat lets out a sigh. "Mom, it's retro."

"You're going to clean this all up when you're done, right?"

"I thought we didn't have time." Cat's voice is muffled, but her mocking intent is still clear. "Hey, maybe I should bring this."

With a flourish, she turns around, waving a worn baseball glove. "I bet Pete left this behind."

Isabelle sees immediately it isn't one of her son's castoffs in Cat's outstretched hand. The gloves he'd used for Little League games eventually became soft and gray, the leather bent and cracked from too many pop flies, the stitches undone. Peter had been so proud when they began to fall apart, and insisted on never replacing a mitt unless it was rendered completely useless. This glove, however, which predated all three of Isabelle's children, has held its shape and shiny brown color, as if it had never been used in a single game.

"I'll take that." Isabelle lifts the glove to her nose, breathing in the deep smell of dust and leather.

"Oh, OK, mom." Cat turns away from her, back to the closet and a fruitless search for a jersey that will remain missing.

There was a sporting goods store next to the obstetrician's office, and right after her first appointment, Isabelle wound her way down the long aisles, past the bright orange jerseys and the smiling cartoon bird decorating the brim of each baseball hat. At

the wire bin that held baseball mitts, she reached into the pile of leather, picking up one that slipped over her hand like a hug, tight and snug and warm. When she reluctantly took it off, her skin was damp, sweaty. She placed the stiff leather against her stomach: a perfect fit.

Once it was hers, she handled the glove every day. She slid her fingers into the stiff compartments, imaging green grass and dirt-covered knees and a hard round ball scuffed in her palm. As her stomach grew, her fingers became fatter, too big for the mitt to fit comfortably. But she struggled to get it on, for the tight leather to envelope then seep through her skin, traveling through her blood until it reached the figure forming inside her, guiding its tiny parts into a male shape.

Seven months later, after hours of blood and gore and a pain so deep that it washed everything to white, Isabelle saw the smile on Dan's face, heard the doctor's words, "It's a girl," felt the tears on her cheeks, as Rebecca, red, round, and not at all like leather, was placed on her empty stomach.

When Isabelle returned home from the hospital, the glove was gone without reason or explanation, as objects that are no longer needed – or needed desperately, depending on the situation – often are.

Little league. Brownies. Tumbling. Community soccer. Cub Scouts. Tap. Ballet. Irish Step. Pee wee hockey. Girl Scouts. Football camp. Skating lessons. Voice lessons. Boy Scouts. Isabelle's first two children were colored pen marks on the calendar: red for Rebecca, blue for Peter. CYO softball. Theatre camp. JV soccer.

Sailing. Dance camp. Show choir. Varsity basketball. "I'm a daddy's girl." Sophomore semiformal. Junior prom. Another junior prom. Senior prom. Eighth grade dance. Pastel dresses, short then long, and grandmother Evans' pearls. A dark blue suit with a yellow striped tie. Milk crates in the mini-van, a new comforter by the door, long auburn hair tied back in a low ponytail, a Class of '95 tee shirt, a quick wave behind her as she took the steps of the brick dorm two at a time, anxious to meet her new roommates. A crowded airport, "Now boarding rows 22 and higher for flight 1423 to Los Angeles," Dan saying it's not too late to change their minds, Isabelle wordless in her disagreement, letting them go. Peter already boarding the plane, an Orioles tee-shirt hanging over his baggy shorts and black Redskins hat, backwards, long legs covered in blond fuzz, high top sneakers once white now closer to gray, untied, no socks.

The Anderson shirt forgotten, Cat buttoned into a ribboned shirt bizarrely reminiscent of the ones she wore as a toddler but just a little too low in the neckline, Isabelle biting her tongue, just happy to finally be in the car, on their way.

"I really don't understand why we still do this."

Isabelle glances beside her, where her daughter fidgets with her purse, then back at the traffic merging ahead in the bright afternoon glare. "Can you hand me my sunglasses?"

"Mom, you're not listening to me. I'm serious – I'm not going into the park with you, I'm going to sit in the car this year and listen to HFS instead."

"Of course you're coming in."

"Mom, I have a broken heart. I'm sure no one will even notice I'm not there. No one talks to me anyways."

"Cat, that's ridiculous."

"Mom! My broken heart is not ridiculous."

"Not that part. The one about you, sitting in the car instead of going to the game." Isabelle squints at the road in front of her, and wonders for the millionth time that day why it is so impossible to conduct a coherent conversation with her daughter. It's disrupting her driving: Cat's dramatics require too much of her attention, and she always ends up missing a turn or running a light.

"Why? No one will miss me."

"Cat, that's not true. They all love you."

"They don't even know me." Cat grumbles. "It's just a stupid game, whatever, we can go by ourselves. I don't get this idiotic tradition, pretending we like these people we barely see, playing like we're all this big happy family, just because my grandfather said so. It's not like I ever knew him, he died like a hundred years before I was born."

"Two years," Isabelle says quickly. "He died the spring after the Orioles won the World Series."

"Whatever. Is it too late to turn the car around, just go home?"

"But you love baseball."

Cat isn't finished. "That's not even the point. I hate Uncle Will's stupid box, I hate watching the game from up there – it's so sterile, with waiters and all that shit."

“Look, Cat, there’s maybe three things in your life that are non-negotiable,”

Isabelle says, swerving quickly to keep the car steady in its lane. “This is one of them. Come on, I’ll buy you some Crackerjacks.”

Minutes of silence, and then:

“If you think you’re getting out of this with just Crackerjacks, you’re insane.”

Isabelle glances to her right, in time to catch the small smile dipping across her daughter’s face. “It will cost you at the very least Boog’s Barbecue, and a large soda, a Sports Bar and a program, and Mike Mussina’s autograph.”

A small price to pay for peace. “You’ve got everything but the last one. I think I’m a little too old to be chasing after ballplayers.”

“Me, too.” Cat plays with the radio dials, and Isabelle relaxes against the sounds of heavy guitars and whiny lead singers, her daughter lulled into silence.

The night her father died, Isabelle drifted in and out of sleep as claps of thunder intermittently sounded outside her window. She was conscious of Dan’s foot touching her own, the rough feel of his toes against her ankle. Peter was finally sleeping through the night, and Dan was anxious for a third child – a fourth and fifth, too, Isabelle suspected.

She was on the edge of wakefulness when the phone rang, a thick jangle that brought no thoughts at all, just the aching need for the noise to stop, go away.

It didn’t. She reached over Dan’s sleeping form to grab the receiver before he or the kids could hear it.

"Iz? It's dad." Maria's voice was sharp, in control, and not at all groggy. "You should come now."

"Is he O.K.?"

"No, he's not." Maria's voice was quick, piercing the final layer of sleep between Isabelle and her voice. "Please, just get up here as soon as you can."

A sharp click sounded, and Isabelle was left holding a dead phone line. She didn't remember getting dressed, finding her keys, or leaving the house quietly, careful not to wake her family. As she somehow navigated the empty highways, then Baltimore's dark streets, she could not stop the thoughts she'd long ago dismissed as petty. Her oldest sister shouldn't be the one making these phone calls; she had only moved in with dad to ensure that she and her husband Will would inherit his house. Maria had no right. It was Isabelle's responsibility to be there for her dad, and her failure, her disregard for her father, what with Rebecca's fifth birthday coming up, and the baby needing her so much, she lost sight of what was truly important.

Her fault. If she were there, her dad would be fine, talking about the Orioles upcoming season, the euphoria from last fall's World Series win coloring the hopes for this year, the young shortstop who was going to be a superstar. Her father would be fine, just fine.

She pictured her father, as she always did, at the ballpark, with his white hair beneath his black and orange cap, clutching a program in one hand and a paper cup of beer in the other, as she pulled in front of her old home, replacing an ambulance with its

lights shut off, its sirens silent, creeping down the suburban street, further and further away from Isabelle.

At the ballpark, Isabelle follows her daughter up the escalators and into the luxury box, where the Ionelli girls moved their yearly outings when Camden Yards replaced Memorial Stadium, Cat lingering at the doorway of the team's pro shop, pointing to the tight orange belly shirt that Isabelle thinks belongs on a Hooters girl and not on her daughter.

In Will's box, Maria holds court over the spacious room, waving pictures of her newest grandchild in one hand, the baby himself in her other arm, red-faced and fussy, and Isabelle is quick to understand why her sister prefers the two-dimensional version.

Her other sisters are like competitive fighters, with their photo albums and their own children's babies slung casually, familiarly, over grandmotherly arms, noses running on their silk suits. Since when do people dress for baseball games? As Isabelle looks around the room, she can see her entire family transformed into the photographs that immortalize these events, flat wide images growing larger every year, her sisters' husbands, then children, then their husbands and children. Every year, another addition, the only subtractions in her branch of the family. Where Dan, Peter and Rebecca once surrounded them, this year, it would only be herself and Cat, pathetically small against the legions of offspring crowding around each one of her sisters.

Isabelle wanders over to the seats, where nieces and nephews chat casually with their fathers, ignoring everyone inside the box. Their talk, no more enlightening than

her sisters' competing glories, focuses on the stock market or that bombing in Ireland or the Thursday night television lineup. Not a single one of them mentions a batting statistic or how quickly Cal Ripken will be inducted into the Hall of Fame, not a single eye is turned toward the game unfolding on the grass below them.

Isabelle presses her face against the glass wall, her breath leaving a small perfect circle against the shiny surface. She looks down on the visiting team trotting onto the field, their gray uniforms dull against the unnaturally bright green field. Behind her somewhere is Cat, standing alone and sulking in the corner of the suite, chewing on the edge of a plastic cup.

She looks back down, at the red brick wall of the warehouse her father never saw converted into a baseball plaza, but imagines his ghost, floating somewhere between the stands, among the fans, in the black and orange hat with the long-banished cartoon bird on the brim.

She will find him, or find something of him, here, just not in this part of here, surrounded by Ionelli blood, her father's legacy, on all sides. "Come with me," Isabelle says to her daughter, grabbing Cat's hand and leading her out of the suite.

Rebecca, in her youth soccer shirt and the Orioles cap Dan picked out for her twelfth birthday. Skipping ahead of seven-year-old Peter, a decal of Cal Ripken, Jr. on his chest, ironed onto to his favorite shirt, the one he refused to take off all summer, no matter how spotted and smelly it became.

"Mom, look at the grass!"

"Can we go up next to the field, Dad?"

"Can we get their autographs?"

"Can I go, too?"

Isabelle watched Dan's blue eyes behind his sunglasses, reflecting the children's pleas. They were older eyes: ones that had seen more than the birth of these three children, and carried the lines to prove it. Someone once told Isabelle that you could see a man's soul through his eyes, and if this was true, her husband had a very complicated soul.

He shifted Cat from one arm to the other, eventually lowering the five-year-old in the red sundress to the ground. "Watch your sister," he told his oldest. Rebecca took Cat's tiny hand in her own, complaining briefly about the chocolate ice cream that coated her fingers, but holding onto them anyway.

"We'll be careful," Peter promised, grabbing Rebecca's other hand. The three of them ran toward the field, their giggles blending with the sounds of the crowd.

Isabelle watched them disappear into a swarm of children, waving programs and calling out to players. Instead of individuals, they became a mass, one loud, cacophonous swell of arms and voices clamoring for attention.

"I love that your family does this," Dan said, slipping his arm around Isabelle's shoulders. "I love that we have this."

Dan's skin on her bare shoulder caused a small tingle to course through her blood. Things weren't going well, but when he touched her, she was optimistic, positive

that their life would go on, through the high points and low points that must mark every marriage.

Still connected, they slid their way past other fans to their seats in the bleachers, far from the creaking field below. Isabelle's sisters had not arrived yet, but that wasn't surprising: none of them had young children to beg for players' autographs, which kept them from appearing before the first pitch was thrown.

The sun was bright that day, and their seats were far from artificial shade. "Can I have your glasses?" Isabelle asked Dan, even though there was a pair somewhere in her tote bag.

"Sure," he said, without any hesitation, sliding the dark frames off his nose and placing them gently onto her face. She closed her eyes as his fingers lingered on her cheek, breathing in the smells that she'd known since her childhood.

It was just another day at the ballpark, one of many afternoons spent in the metal seats, cheering on the Orioles, keeping score, spilling popcorn, buying funnel cakes and settling disagreements.

Isabelle pulls Cat through the ballpark, a shiny new home that had replaced the stadium of her childhood. Everywhere she looks, she is reminded of the past: brick walkways, old-fashioned banners with Babe Ruth's image, round brass plaques honoring players who died long before this monument to their efforts was built. But it is a manufactured past, one that may have captured the likeness but not the essence of

what had come before it. You can't build history, she whispers, her stomach pressed against the turnstiles as she exits the park.

"Mom, where are we going?" Cat's voice is high with concern, but also, Isabelle imagines, a little bit of thrill.

"We're scalping bleacher seats," she tells her daughter as they push through the crowd gathered outside the park on this perfect, bright, brilliant day for a ballgame.

"But we have seats – good seats – in Uncle Will's box."

"Did Dad ever teach you how to keep score?"

Cat shakes her head. "Peter always did that."

Isabelle makes a list in her head. Bad seats, a program and pencil, straight lines in a small box. Cat would concentrate so much on fitting her pencil marks within the tiny squares for each at-bat she wouldn't have the chance to talk. And Isabelle could watch the game like she did with her father: quietly, reverently, with close attention and deep concentration, almost as if she were his son.

The Ninth Inning: The Show

Hattie watches as Sam's hand wraps around the thick black pen, his knuckles, once dark and strong, now gnarled and gray. Carefully, painfully, he signs his name in jagged script, always followed by "HOF." Hall of Fame, she snorts to herself. Like that could make up for the way her husband was treated. But to Sam, it means something, something that runs deeper than letters on a baseball. So she keeps her mouth shut.

Hattie rarely stays quiet around Sam; she'd wondered aloud if this was such a good idea, flying up to Richmond to spend the day in a large drafty room signing autographs at a baseball card show. They'd never asked Sam to do this before, but she'd heard all about it from the other players' wives: row after row of tables and chairs, set up with cards and bats and whatnot, people milling around, spending good money on useless items.

This card show, the Suttons' first, is located in the same complex as a NASCAR racetrack, and in the parking lot Hattie found herself surrounded by the type of people she was careful to avoid. Thick white men with faded jeans and long mustaches, voices too loud and dark looks in their eyes. "I told you we shouldn't do this," she muttered to

Sam, but he kept walking right into that building, where he was greeted by a quick young man with a cellular phone clipped to his belt.

"Mr. Sutton, so nice for you to join us. Congratulations on your induction," said the man, who introduced himself as Jeff. He is dressed in a green blazer, a black tee-shirt and dark blue jeans, and he held out his olive-colored hand quickly to Sam, pumping it in a rapid motion. He was twenty, maybe thirty years old, Hattie couldn't tell for sure. Everyone under fifty, especially white people, have started to look the same to her. Maybe that's what it means to get old -- you can't tell what young is anymore.

"And you must be Mrs. Sutton." His smile looked less than sincere. Hattie nodded as formally as she could, wondering what happened to the young man's collar.

"I'll be sitting here, with Sam – can I call you Sam?" And then, without waiting for a confirmation, he continued, " – as Sam here signs autographs. I hope you're ready to shake a lot of hands today – people love meeting a Hall of Famer, particularly one so new."

After a lifetime of the Major Leagues turning their backs on men like her husband, last summer they finally came calling, wanting Sam Sutton's face on a bronze plaque up there in Cooperstown. The funny thing about baseball is that it always seemed to be on its own schedule, and now it talks about the Negro Leagues as if it's something wonderful, some sacred part of its own history. They made television shows about men like Josh Gibson, Satchel Paige, Cool Papa Bell, all teammates of Sam's at one time or another, all men who'd eaten in Hattie's own kitchen, and sold jerseys to the

teenage boys with Homestead Grays and Kansas City Monarchs scripted across the front.

Hattie, never one to believe in symbolic gestures, scoffed at baseball's decision to open its doors to players who were never allowed to step foot on their hallowed fields when it mattered.

"Nothing those men up there in New York can do will change your life, can change the way we lived then," Hattie told Sam when it first started happening. "They didn't let you play their game, they can't pretend that this makes up for it."

But still he wanted it, hoped one day they'd come for him. "I was MVP in '42 and '43," Sam said. "I won the Pennant five years in a row, made more money than almost anyone else did, and I was worth it. Thirteen years I gave them, thirteen years of nothing but the best."

He never mentioned the years after the war, the five years following his return from Europe, when his step and his bat had slowed and the Major Leagues, finally open to Negroes, didn't want him. Jackie Robinson had changed things, but the player who came back from the war couldn't squeeze through the white gates Jackie had opened. The Homestead Grays dropped his contract, so he signed on with the lesser Baltimore team, where his career died slowly, echoing the end of the league that had become a burial ground for men who were too old or too damaged by the war, or who never had enough talent in the first place.

After baseball, that was when their life really happened. For fifty years, Hattie hadn't had to think too much about the game. They'd settled back in the south, near her

extended family, and Sam had a normal job, a real job, was home nights and weekends, had dinner every night with her and the children.

“See, Hattie?” Sam gestures to the line of about 50 people spread out in front of him, some young, some old, most of them white, all of them male. Some of them have jerseys, pictures, baseballs, all kinds of things Hattie can’t believe anyone would want an old man’s signature on. “I told you this would be a good thing for us.”

“Keep signing,” Hattie nods to the man standing in front of him, trying to corral two small children with one hand, holding a thick pen with the other. “You don’t want to slow things down.”

When Sam’s letter finally came, years after the images of men he played alongside were carved into bronze, Hattie left it on the counter instead of putting it with the other letters and bills, the thick cream envelope with Sam’s name typed in black ink. She knew what it was right away, and Sam did, too.

Sam talked Hattie into joining him in New York for the induction ceremony, promising many of their old friends would be there, that’d be a reunion of the old boys and girls from the Negro Leagues, a community that once felt like family to Hattie, when she was a young wife and her own family was far away. And it was – the first person she saw when she stepped off the train in Cooperstown was Carrie Snow, the woman who lived in the house next door for several seasons.

“Hattie Sutton! I’m so glad it’s your year,” she said, her mother-of-pearl glasses shaking as she wrapped her arms around Hattie’s shoulders. “Have I got a lot to tell you.”

“Young man,” Hattie says to Jeff, wishing he’d at least offered his last name. “Is Sam the only one from the Negro Leagues here today?”

“The only one, ma’am,” he says without looking at her, as he continues to usher the people closer to Sam, taking their tickets and matching them against the items they hold in their hands.

“You want to see this?” He hands over one of the tickets, a thick piece of four-color cardboard with the silhouette of a black man in mid-swing screened below the words “Negro League” and above “\$20.00.”

“That’s only for balls and flats,” Jeff explains, taking the ticket back from Hattie’s hands. “There’s a different price for jerseys and bats – we have to make sure no one tries to sneak in any of those on a cheap ticket, don’t we?”

Hattie doesn’t see the difference, but she keeps her mouth shut and looks around the large open room, one side devoted to tables of people selling sports memorabilia, the other to lines winding around different players, like Sam. She peers over at the next line; a big white man in a red collared shirt poses for pictures in front of a sign that says PETE ROSE in capital letters, with prices much higher than Sam’s listed alongside it.

“Isn’t that the man who bet on baseball?” She says to Jeff, who looks up at her quickly.

“Mr. Rose is a wonderful friend to this company,” he says smoothly, then turns back to the next person in Sam’s line.

She wants to ask more questions, about why a man who isn’t in the Hall of Fame gets more money for his autograph than her husband, a brand new inductee, but she

doesn't want to embarrass Sam, not now. Besides, she needs to figure out how to lay out Sam's baseball cards without Jeff noticing.

"The card shows are nice," Carrie Snow had said to her during one of the long, hot speeches given throughout Sam's induction weekend. "The companies take care of you, pay for your transportation, put you up in a hotel, take out for a good meal, and people line up for hours, just to have the letters HOF written on a baseball. A few months later, you'll get a check in the mail, but the real money is in the cards."

"Sam's never had a baseball card."

"None of them did," Carrie said. "That's no worry. There's people who'll do it for you, put anything you want on them, make up something really sharp. You sell them at the shows, under the table, and what you make is pure profit."

"But won't the promoters be angry?" Sam leaned over Hattie with what may have passed as a disapproving glare.

"We all need catch a break every now and then," Carrie's husband Jake, inducted four years before, insisted from the other side of his wife. "They turn their heads to it, believe me."

Inside her purse, Hattie fingers the plastic case holding the thick stack of baseball cards. Jeff has his ear glued to his cell phone and his back turned to the Suttons, isn't paying one bit of attention to her, so she pulls out a small stack of the shiny new cards and places them between Sam's elbow and her arm.

"Hattie, put those away." Sam's whisper is louder than he intends, but she shushes him anyway.

"Just leave it, Sam. I promise, if that boy says anything, or if none of these people want one, they'll disappear."

The very next person in line, a young man with a mustache and goatee, looks over at the stack of cards and asks Sam if they're for sale.

"Five dollars," Sam says, unable to keep the pride out of his voice.

"Cool. I'll take one." The boy lays a twenty down on the table.

Sam counts out the change, but doesn't have enough. "Hattie, see if you can get me some fives or ones," he says, his hands shaking as he smooths out a bill.

Hattie stands up slowly, and glances at the long card tables set up in front of her. She doesn't know which of these people to trust, who would actually make change for an old black woman sliding under the rules that each and every one of them are breaking, too. She looks for a female face, but there aren't too many of them, definitely none with dark skin. She passes tables and tables of sports memorabilia, cards and balls and framed pictures of big sweaty men, and is surprised to see that every so often, they are laid out alongside brightly colored stuffed animals.

"It's a strange combination, don't you think?" A woman behind one of the tables speaks to Hattie as she lingers in front of her. "But I suppose the men think that arranging these little toys gives us women something useful to do."

The woman introduces herself to Hattie, and asks, "First time at a show?"

"My husband played in the Negro Leagues. He's signing balls over there," Hattie points back to the dais.

"And let me guess, you were sent out for change."

Hattie nods and as the woman counts out dollars she talks about the Beanie Babies, which are valuable to collectors, just like Sam's signature. "It makes no sense to me, either," the woman says. "My husband says the Beanies are meant to attract the women, but there aren't too many who come to these things -- girlfriends and wives who couldn't talk their men into dropping them off at the mall down the road. I've never seen one here on her own."

"Women are smarter than men," Hattie tells her. "They realize how silly it is to throw good money away on a piece of paper with someone's writing on it."

The woman laughs, and hands Hattie her change.

"So you're selling cards at the table?" The woman asks, and Hattie doesn't know what to say.

"Oh, it's OK," the woman continues. "Everyone does it here. I won't tell on you."

Hattie nods, and can't keep the pride out of her voice. "I designed them myself."

"Then you have to let me see one," the woman's voice is eager, and Hattie hands one over, Sam's face on the front big and bold and young and powerful.

"This is nice," the woman says, running her finger over the shiny surface, taking in Sam's features.

"I designed it myself," Hattie says. "That picture was always my favorite; it sat in a frame in our living room for fifty some years."

She likes that this is the photo of Sam that will exist in the collectors' memory: The pain gives him a personality that goes beyond just a black face in a faded picture. On the back of the card are Sam's lifetime statistics, or at least as many as they could

figure out. No one kept track of them the way they did with the white leagues. Sam remembered some, they'd gathered more from a handful of worn newspaper clippings, and Hattie made the rest up herself.

As she winds her way back through the tables, crumpled dollar bills clutched tightly in her hand, Hattie thinks about the time before that picture of Sam was taken, when the years written on the back of the card still stretched ahead of them. Baseball had always been there; it had marked her life even before she met Sam. When she was a little girl, her father would take the whole family, sisters, cousins, everyone, to the dusty bleachers near their farm in Alabama. As a child, she'd never seen white men play; to her, baseball was a sport for the light brown, the rich beige, the dark ebony men in their faded gray uniforms and their cracked leather gloves. When she got older, she knew the other leagues existed; the Birmingham paper always carried the stories and statistics of teams that played in the North, in cities like Boston and New York and Detroit. But that was another world, another game.

It was on that dusty field a mile down the dirt road from her family's farm, in a ballpark that could barely be called anything more than a makeshift diamond surrounded by weedy fields and a few dozen wooden planks slapped on a rickety platform, where she first saw Sam Sutton. He was darker than most of his teammates, with thick arms seasoned under the winter Cuban sun. There was a cockiness in his walk, the way he strode to the plate, tapping his bat against the ground before lifting it onto the shoulder of his gray uniform, stretched taut, as if it did not quite fit his

muscular build. She swore he looked up at her with his black eyes, picking her out in the middle of her cousins and stepsisters and nieces, and winked.

"Daddy, can we sit closer?" She tugged on her father's arm until he agreed, and took the whole family right up to the fence, to the splintered benches right beside the third base line, close enough to touch the giant who patrolled the field.

And that was the beginning of her life.

Baseball was there throughout her marriage, through the first cold years in Pittsburgh, where every night, Hattie scrubbed the hatred and the insults and the spit off her skin, and wished for home. She thanked God two years later, when Sam joined the Atlanta Black Crackers, and she had her first baby in a Southern city. Sam Jr. was born in the winter while his father played down in Cuba, and Hattie became pregnant again right after her husband signed a contract with the best team in the Negro league, the Homestead Grays.

She was due in the summer, about two months into the baseball season. Sam found her a nice hospital close to the ball field right in Washington, with Negro doctors and everything. Alice and Sam Jr. were staying with their neighbors; it was an adventure to them, and Hattie was sure they would not realize she was gone.

She stayed away from home for ten days. She came back from the hospital alone on Sam's strong arm, the small boy-baby left behind in a tiny box. Sometimes she dreamed of him, heard him crying from that box, not dead; he just took a little longer to open his brown eyes, to let out a wail. They should have waited for him, waited until he was ready to be born, and not have rushed him along.

It was August before she was out of bed, doing housework, having coffee with her neighbors again. She was sick of her children tip-toeing around her, and wanted to hear them yell again, see them with dirt on their pants. She didn't recognize her husband, solid and solicitous, keeping the children and himself neat and silent around her. She wanted the cocky, boisterous man she'd fallen in love with back, wanted her loud and messy children to stop treating her like one of Alice's good dolls, the ones that sat on the shelf and were not to be used for play.

So one warm Sunday afternoon after Sam had left for the ballpark, she gathered the children and took them to the game.

The Homestead Grays played in a park that was larger, better-kept than the fields of her childhood. The bleachers were smooth and painted, and you could sit on them without first checking for splinters. There were booths for the local dignitaries, lawyers and doctors and teachers, black men and even women who held positions that she never imagined possible until they became her neighbors. Wide bunting in blue and white and red stretched out in front of their boxes, proclaiming a patriotism that would soon swoop up all their willing and able men and leave these fields empty in their absence.

Alice and Sam Jr. were dressed in their Sunday clothes, neat white outfits faded from many washings, the flowers on her daughter's skirt long past their original color. They had been quiet on the streetcar ride, but by the time they reached the stadium, they had started fussing, poking at each other, and Hattie was secretly pleased to see her children acting like children again.

She marched them into the stadium and to the front row directly behind third base where her husband would soon stand. It had been months since she sat in these seats, and the other wives approached her cautiously, giving her polite hellos and asking after her health. Amid the quiet welcomes, Carrie Snow came right up beside her, slinging her large black arms around Hattie's thin shoulders.

"It's good to see you again, girl," she said in her honeyed voice, her dark curls smooth under her maroon hat. "The ballpark isn't the same without Mrs. Hattie Sutton's cheers."

The afternoon was hot, but the stadium was crowded. The well-dressed Negroes lined the base paths, while darker, dustier fans filled the outfield bleachers. Her children sat beside her for awhile, but then finally asked, "Can we go play?"

"Keep your Sunday clothes neat," Hattie admonished after them as they tripped down the steps to the open grass beside the foul lines, where a dozen or so children ran in tight circles.

Hattie turned to her neighbors, the other players' wives and girlfriends and mothers, some she knew well, others she didn't recognize at all. The group was forever changing, as contracts were bought and sold, and women, too, came and went. The players who were married didn't always stay that way for long; baseball was tough on the women, especially in the Negro leagues. Few players made enough money during the season to last the entire year, and most of them had to go south – to Mexico, Cuba, Latin America – during the winter months. Even Sam, who was one of the better players, had only been paid well enough once he'd joined the Homestead team, on

account of him winning the Most Valuable Player award two years in a row, and then helping Buck Leonard and Josh Gibson bring the team the world championship. Sam made just enough money so Hattie didn't have to work so much, and he didn't have to leave the country in November.

But there were some regulars, wives who formed a strong nucleus that held the rest of the women together. They were caught between very different worlds -- their husbands weren't quite professional Negroes; but neither did they have much in common with their families back on the farms. They formed their own tight society, and Carrie and Hattie were right in the middle of that association. Once Carrie made her move toward Hattie, the other wives became more relaxed.

The women chatted and scolded their children as Hattie smiled and tried to keep up. Too much had happened since she was gone, too much had changed, and her teeth hurt after awhile. But she had missed this, this small part of ordinary life, something she wanted back so badly. She was tired of being, well, tired, tired of her family and friends treating her so gently.

She hadn't told her husband she was coming to the game. So as the Homestead Grays took the field and Sam looked up when his children called out his name, his expression registered surprise at Hattie sitting beside them. The benches were not as close to the field as they were in her hometown, so there was not a chance that she could reach out and touch him, but she wanted to, wanted to run her fingers against his soft leather glove, across the lines of surprise, then joy, that marked his face.

Hattie felt something that had been dead inside her stir again while she watched her husband stand guard on the base path, his strong legs planted like tree stumps in the soft dirt. He moved fluidly, with a grace she had forgotten, diving when the ball came his way, throwing it across the infield from his knees, just in time to put the runner out at first. And when he strode to the plate, his dark eyes shaded by his gray cap, his arms and leg exuded a power that transcended the ball field. He glared down the opposing pitcher, daring him to throw his best stuff, and when he did, Sam lifted it up with a quick movement of his bat, high into the air, carrying it further out, until Hattie lost the ball in the sun sometime before it landed with a thud beyond the fence in right field. With his head down, Sam rounded the bases to the cheers of the crowd, only lifting his eyes when he got to third base to wink at his wife.

There was a picture taken of Sam that day, his head held high and proud after his feats on the field, his body taut and perfect and capable of just about anything. He stood tall in his gray uniform, handsome and young and strong, and when Hattie looks closely enough at it, she can see some of the pain of that summer hidden in the crevices across his face. There was never any doubt this would be the picture on the front of Sam's first and only baseball card.

Back at the table, Sam is engaged in conversation with the young man who had been waiting for his change. "Conversation" is probably not the right word for it, more like a speech on the highlights from his playing days, peppered with just enough exaggerations to make Hattie roll her eyes.

"You should have seen me back then," Sam is saying. "That Mark McGwire? His homeruns were nothing compared to mine. And no way could a man like David Wells ever pitch a perfect game against the Homestead Grays. We would have chased his fat butt out of the park in the first inning."

There's some good within her husband's words, connecting this old man to the ballplayer Hattie fell in love with a hundred lifetimes ago. During the long years since baseball had left their lives, there'd been little talk of it; Sam and Hattie rarely talked about the past. But since Sam received that letter, he'd tell everyone who would listen about the feel of the earth beneath his feet, the smell of hot dogs and cut grass and Sunday clothes and leather gloves.

Sam looks up at his wife as she sinks down into the seat, laying the change down on the table between them.

"My wife here -- she was the best woman to stick by me through those days," Sam says to the young man, handing over the signed baseball card. "She raised our children by herself while I played, and they turned out fine, better than fine. Both of them went to college, our daughter's a lawyer, and Sam Junior owns his own business. All I have are these stats on the back of a card. But Hattie, she has something really to be proud of."

Sam finally stops talking long enough to hand the man some bills, who picks up his cards and turns away. There is no one else in line behind him.

"That was nice of you to say that," she tells her husband.

He turns his head toward her, and there's a smile on his face. "Nothing but the truth."

Hattie realizes they are alone at the table. "Where'd Jeff go?"

Sam gestures to his left. "Helping out with the crowds, I think. Not much for him to do over here."

Hattie watches the line stretch out in front of Pete Rose and shakes her head. The man bet on baseball, and still people pay \$35 for a ball, \$75 for a bat, then wait two hours for him to sign it. Don't they know what her husband went through, for years and years, to play the same game? Don't they realize his swing was stronger, his step quicker, his hands faster, than Pete Rose's ever could have been?

She piles Sam's baseball cards in front of her, tracing his image with her fingers. "Do you want me to sign one for you?" Sam asks her.

She looks again at her husband, and tries to see him as a stranger would: his new suit, his gray hair combed neatly, his face old and wrinkled, but she can't ignore the details she has known her entire life. There is a reason behind each and every one of those wrinkles, a response to the challenges Sam met head-on, with Hattie beside him, witnessing each and every one. But she sees the joy there, too, something hidden deep in his eyes, proud to be talking about his homeruns and his awards, proud to be signing those letters, HOF.

"You're having fun today, aren't you?" Hattie asks.

He hands her back a card, with an old man's lettering covering his photograph.

"Sam Sutton, HOF." Hattie tucks it into her purse, and sits back to wait for the next baseball fan who wants her husband's autograph.