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ROUNDING THIRD

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This collection is dedicated to Mother Teresa and the Vaquero Pistolero for always
nourishing my two loves—writing and baseball.

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ABSTRACT

“If baseball is a narrative, an epic of exile and return, a vast, communal poem about separation, loss, and the hope for reunion—if baseball is a Romance Epic—it is finally told by the audience.” These words come from A. Bartlett Giamatti’s essay “Baseball as Narrative,” and they are the inspiration behind my short story collection, *Rounding Third*. Baseball’s audience is its fans; these are the people who live and breathe in my stories.

Baseball’s literary tradition is rich with tales of players and coaches, those who are directly involved with the game. Those who play it and make it a career, especially at the professional level, are a staggering minority in comparison to those who love and cherish the sport from the bleachers, from televisions, from the glossy pages of magazines and collectible cards sold in shiny, metallic packages. This collection gives an ownership, urgency, and voice to the fans.

Giamatti, in the same essay, also writes, “In baseball, everyone wants to arrive at the same place where they start.” I began thinking about how this quote connected to the one mentioned earlier. The key lies in the phrase “separation, loss, and the hope for reunion.” Every journey has a starting point. In baseball, and in my stories about this beautiful game, the characters recognize their separation and distance from that starting point. Like Giamatti says, they “want” to get back; there are no guarantees. And even if they do, they arrive changed, people reformed by dealing with the challenges of life and the challenges of loving people, people going through their own changes.

So while my narratives parallel the structure of the game by having characters on a base path, attempting to reach an either familiar or unfamiliar “home,” they also thrive on it as subject matter. And it is really this structuring that inspires the title. “Rounding third and headed for home” is a common baseball phrase. It means that a player has reached a certain point in his offensive journey on the field and is coming into the final stretch where he will face at least one definite obstacle in the catcher. I feel like my central characters are all “rounding third.” I feel like the emphasis is on the journey, the striving to get to another point. These characters may or

may not make it home, and perhaps the home they reach is not the one they anticipated, but it is the movement, the “the rounding,” that is important.

Baseball is definitely one point of cohesiveness for this collection. But this collection is more than a group of five baseball stories; it is more than five baseball fan stories. Again I go back to Giamatti’s phrase: “separation, loss, and the hope for reunion.” This phrase is a thematic staple for *Rounding Third*. If someone had told me six months ago that I had to work with the theme of “baseball as a means for dealing with separation and loss,” I would have said, quite assuredly, that those were confines too narrow for more than a single short story. I would have been wrong. As I started to work with this theme, I realized that it was rich with possibilities for creation, originality, and stories that simultaneously inspire hope and break my heart.

My intention for this thesis is to produce a collection of baseball stories that are unlike any baseball stories being published. I can tell you why I want to write baseball stories . . . because no one is writing the baseball stories I really want to read. I’ve read about countless walk-off homeruns and no-hitters and eccentric rookies and has-beens making comebacks in the twilight of their careers. What I haven’t read is a collection of stories that gives fans an intimate ownership of baseball, an ownership that is critical and valuable. This game is so much more than a game, and I have been obsessed with proving this through my stories. Sports are always under fire for scandals, spoiled millionaire athletes, drugs, failed role models, corrupt business measures . . . but for all that and everything else, there is a purity of sport. To me, it is the tangible enactment of the human spirit. For me, baseball is a staging of the American dream of simultaneously being a valued member of a community and an individual who sets out and achieves personal success and differentiation. It is complex and exact and gorgeous, which is what I always try to have my stories be. So, while *Rounding Third* is a collection I’ve written about baseball, I also hope it is a collection where I have written baseball.

THE ALMOST DARK

“You have to invest yourself in something bigger.” My therapist paused and studied her seashell pink fingernails, mostly for effect I thought. “Something bigger than yourself,” she added.

She had just finished taking me through an envisioning exercise involving the beach and sand and large, foamy waves, and I hadn’t been wholly willing to participate and I think she could tell, even though I closed my eyes like she told me to. Now, as she delivered this new, ingenious dictum that was costing me \$65 an hour, I stared at the maple tree framed by the window behind her face. I had two thoughts: Lexington is a pretty town, and I am hungry. It felt like an ill-spent sixty-five bucks.

“Elizabeth, you are closing yourself off from everything. You are absorbed in yourself, trapped by your self image.” She stared at me with a practiced intensity. “If you shift your focus, become part of something, you will find it a lot easier to get control of your eating and your anxieties about it.”

I stared back at her with an intensity that was spontaneous and natural and let some time pass before I offered my response. Dr. Collins has hair the color of a Hershey bar and wears Tahari suits to work, where she sits in a room with framed jazz festival posters on the walls and counsels people on how to survive life day after day. Her complexion is beautiful, and if I had to guess, she’s early 40s, size four. I took a deep breath and shifted my focus to the maple tree before speaking.

“I am a part of something. I am close with both of my parents. I am a member of the Rho Delta sorority at Eastern Kentucky University. I sit in chapter meeting with sixty-three other girls once a week and participate in philanthropic events with them about once a month. I have a group of college friends I watch movies with, and I have a group of high school friends I e-mail and see sometimes at holiday breaks.” I searched

for more social *investments*. “Oh, I also have an ex-boyfriend who is in love with his best friend, Mike, who I am actively invested in avoiding on the rare occasion when I actually feel like going out to have a drink.”

Dr. Collins looked tired. “I think we’re done for today. See Jennifer downstairs to schedule your next appointment.”

As I drove through downtown Lexington, I focused on the buildings. It really was a pretty city: neat, contained, preppy. Men in dress shirts and bright ties waiting to cross at each intersection. Little boutiques that were all bright pink and shine. Evenly sized trees in planters, surrounded by flowers. Angular sculptures and fountains with plaques of commemoration. This town was everything I was not, and I loved it for that.

Once I got back to Richmond, I faced the certain obstacle of filling up an evening. I dreaded the elevator doors opening on the sixth floor of McGregor Hall. Walking to my private dorm room (an extra \$375 a semester) in the corner meant passing five doors to five rooms inhabited by ten girls who were my sorority sisters, girls who knew me and genuinely liked me, but who would want to talk to me, to get me to go out in the local bars on a Friday night, who would look at me and study me and not realize that the whole cycle was agonizing.

I felt my throat constricting, and when John Mayer’s “Your Body is a Wonderland” began to play on Lite 98, it was too much to remain self-contained. Normally, I could cry in silence; I had mastered it. But at that moment, the little gulps of air I tried to take into my lungs were being thrown right back out, a sound like a dying bird that I was embarrassed to be making even though I was alone. I deserved to be listening to a beautiful man crooning about a woman’s body so divine that he was inspired to sing it to the world. I deserved that pain. Anyone who went from a size six to a size fourteen in the course of three months deserved all the shame and embarrassment that coincidence offered.

The song ended and cut to a commercial for the cheapest textbooks in town, and I turned and routed myself for a longer way back to my campus in neighboring Richmond. I pulled into a gas station, wiped my eyes with one of the extra napkins in my glove compartment from my middle-of-the-night fast food runs, and calmed my erratic breathing.

My stomach was turning as I walked through the glass doors and into the stacks and pyramids of brightly-packaged, car-friendly snacks. I walked back to the coolers, filled with row after row of drinks. A bottled water first. That was easy. Cut the calories with the drink; every little bit helped. Beef jerky was a fat free food, so said the bag. And some baked potato chips, not fried. And trail mix, the one with the M&Ms. A few wouldn't hurt, and I probably wouldn't even eat that on the ride home anyway.

As I approached the counter to pay, I felt nervous. It was seventy-two degrees outside, and I was wearing a big, gray hooded sweatshirt. I felt comfortable and covered in it, but I got a lot of strange looks for wearing it on days when most people were wearing shorts and tank tops. The guy behind the counter was young, which always made it worse. But he barely looked up as he punched in prices and dispensed my change.

Back in the car, I felt calm. The skin on my cheeks was a little stiff from the dried tears, but other than that, there was no remnant of my minor breakdown. I rolled down the windows, started the engine, and opened the beef jerky.

Brick townhouses and shopping centers and churches whirred past. They were unfamiliar, which made them comforting. I drove by a townhouse with periwinkle shutters and blue hydrangea growing in the yard. It made me think of my grandmother. I decided to take a break before the baked chips. I'd enjoy the scenery and save the snacks for the doldrums of the twenty miles of overly familiar interstate that waited ahead.

The traffic thickened. I fell in line with the other vehicles, attempting to figure out why the rush hour traffic was a full hour early. But the top of the next rise revealed the answer: minor league baseball. The Lexington Legends were having a home game.

The entrance to the stadium was two stoplights ahead. I hadn't seen live baseball since my parents had taken me to Cincinnati for a Reds game about seven years ago. The street vendors had been my favorite thing, and the size of the stadium had startled me after seeing major league parks in the frame of a TV set my entire life.

The alternative was warding off fifteen offers to go out in Richmond and see the same kids who sat silent and hungover in the back of my classes. Going out meant watching those people play games, games I could not play. They were games of actively loving and hating people, based on who other people were loving and hating at that very

moment. For someone who cowered on a corner stool, successfully working to slip under the radar, that meant zero playing time; I was equally deprived of love and hate.

I clicked on my turn signal to get into the left lane. It was April, and the world around me seemed to be buzzing. A baseball game would take probably three hours or more. There was a good chance I'd get back into town around dark, and if I stopped at the grocery for diet sodas, there would be just enough time to take a Nyquil, crawl into bed, and watch Nick-at-Nite before sleeping off the day.

I paid five bucks to park my car. As I pulled my keys from the ignition, I felt a small wave of panic. People swarmed toward the park. Small children galloped ahead of parents who belonged on brochures for health insurance or nutrition guidelines. Teenage couples held hands and carried blankets to sit in the lawn section. A little league team marched by in orange t-shirts and black ball pants. No one seemed to notice me alone, silent, wide-eyed in my little green car.

I opened the plastic bag of trail mix and ate several handfuls, which were a little stale. The ballpark food would probably be overpriced anyway. I stationed my purse on my shoulder and jabbed my hands deep into the pockets of my sweatshirt. The ticket counter was up toward the front of the park.

I felt nauseas, anxious, like I was about to give a public performance doomed to failure. I was probably, secretly the most unhappy person in the park. I'd stick out like a sore thumb among the patriots of the Great American Pastime. I was not the nineteen year old who belonged on any brochure, least of all one about being a happy, ballpark-going youth in America. I was no poster child for any healthy amusement, or any amusement at all for that matter, and I sensed that I was signing a contract to be part of a cliché I knew nothing about, except of course that it was a cliché. I felt like an imposter.

But a young boy was throwing a tantrum for a blow-up Larry the Legend doll. Just inside the park, a wife was reprimanding a slap-happy husband for drinking too much beer before the game. And next to her, at a long table, three Lexington Legends grinned ear-to-ear as people lined up to have them scribble their names on various game-related items. An adolescent girl punched her little brother in the arm and declared he

was a douche bag while a skinny, white-haired man selling programs danced the Charleston for his customers each time he made a sale.

I smiled and paid six dollars for a seat in the bleachers and went inside the park. I considered the concession stand for a moment and then decided I'd like to find my seat first. I waded down the concrete half-steps and matched one of the numbered seat backs with my ticket. I was surprised to be that close to the field; it felt like stepping into a picture book illustration. Green grass and russet dirt, too bright to be real, ran into a bordering fence of technicolor advertisements, and all of it pressed up against the sky, whose color reminded me of the lines on a sheet of notebook paper. I felt weightless and dizzy, like a child who has been spinning in circles.

The visiting team was warming up and tossing on the field. They were stretching and sprinting and throwing balls to one another that smacked as they reached the leather pouch of gloved hands. I was close enough to see their faces. They were beautiful and astonishingly young. This was single A, so most of these boys were in the very beginning of their careers. Their bodies were muscular, but not defined and developed like the big leaguers on the covers of magazines.

Some looked serious, focused, nervous. Others grinned as if pulling off the greatest pranks of their lives. They danced and hopped against the green of the outfield, unaware that they were performing. The game, they knew, was a performance. A very weighted performance. But right now was limbering, personal time to get ready for the job, and they took it as just that while hundreds of people, including me, watched and envied them, romanticizing this prelude to their heroics.

A young kid in a red smock came through selling programs (I doubted he knew what the Charleston was), and I bought one. There were profiles of the home team and a black-and-white, photocopied insert with the stats of the visiting team. I read about them. John Graybill from Hudson, Ohio. Adam Albright from Johnson City, Tennessee. Curt Myers who was nineteen like myself, and Scott Bouchard who was 6'3" and 178 pounds.

I imagined them signing their contracts, calling relatives to say, "I am a professional baseball player." I wondered how many of them had gone to college and if their mothers had panicked when they announced they were going into the major league draft. I pictured them handing out baseball cards to young cousins at Thanksgiving and

Christmas and could hear their fathers speaking about them in proud, booming voices to other men. They were like characters come to life in an outdoor, diamond-shaped playhouse. As I stood for the national anthem, my heart was fluttering.

Time passed by in outs, which passed by in tops and bottoms of innings. There weren't any homeruns or close plays at the plate, but the game was spectacular in its own way. It was an organized cycle, but unpredictable. Each inning offered something new, and I listened to the man sitting in front of me as he taught his small, sandy-haired son the game of baseball so I could better understand what was unfolding before me. There were relief pitchers and pinch runners and long fly balls that seemed to pause against the sky at the crest of their arc toward the outfield. Frustrated batters slammed helmets into the concrete floors of the dugouts after striking out, and young boys with clinched fists and pumping arms hustled to beat the throw at first.

But I wasn't always watching the game. A man in khakis and a loud, tropical-print shirt proposed to his much younger girlfriend on the Jumbotron in the middle of the third inning. Between home plate and the pitcher's mound just before the fifth inning, a local middle school cheerleading squad performed in tiny, pleated skirts, moving with the self-assurance and physicality of girls much older than them. The coach wore red lipstick and high-heeled sandals and beamed when they finished.

And there were characters in the stands, too. A boy with gelled hair and tanned skin, who knew he was handsome, tripped up the steps and spilled a gigantic coke. An old man constantly adjusted the volume on his hearing aid and kept referring to the umpire as "Blue," criticizing his every call. A little girl in pink overalls threw her sippie cup onto the field which required the third base coach to call time and retrieve it.

All of them, the players, the fans, the non-fans, were mine. They belonged to me, and when we were mixed all together, we were what I expected us to be, and at the same time, we were not.

With the score tied at four at the top of the eighth, a stirring began out in the lawn section. There was laughing and shoulder tapping, and people, even the pairs of teenage lovers, moved to crouching positions on their blankets and beach towels. They counted down from five in unison, and when they sang out "One!" in a key of triumph, they stood quickly and as one, throwing their open palms into the air, a gesture of offering, and then just as quickly sank back to ground level.

The man in front of me leaned over to his son. “Look, Joey, they’re starting the wave out there. Be ready to stand up when it come to us.”

Now that the happy conspirators out on the lawn had the attention of everyone else in the stands, they started counting down again. The gathering of fans shifted and moved toward the edge of their seats in anticipation, and it began, people moving up and down in sections to make something whole and fluid, as pretty and mysterious as an ocean.

The first time, I let it pass me by. I watched it swell around the stadium and end with the picnic pavilion deck. Seconds later, it began its second circling of the park, and this time I hunched forward in my chair, waiting to take part in the choreography. And as it reached me, I sprang up and hoisted my hands above my head, mirroring the movements of Joey and his father in front of me. I laughed out loud. It came around three more times, and three more times I rose and fell.

The Legends scored in the bottom of the eighth, the ninth went by very quickly for both sides, and then it was over. I sat still as people began to file out through the exits. The winding down of this whole thing was something very different from the thing itself. People left in droves; vendors packed up goods and zipped shut their leather pouches of cash. Young men dusted the dirt from their uniforms and high-fived teammates before emptying the field. It wasn’t full daylight, and the stadium lights looked strangely beautiful in the almost dark.

I stood to leave, and the sixth floor of McGregor Hall materialized suddenly in my mind. The paste-colored walls and brown floor tiles and colorful, beautiful girls flitting about with all the energy and life I never had and might never have. I rolled my program the way I used to roll magazines up to make telescopes when I was a child and moved toward the world outside.

As I reached the edge of the parking lot, I panicked. For half of a half of a second, I thought my car might have been stolen. But that would be ok. Adventure would be better than ok. Stranded in a city with flower boxes and parks and downtown fountains and angular sculptures. And as I fantasized walking the pretty streets of downtown Lexington and inspecting the shop windows of the boutiques, I came across my car, just as I had left it, with the ECU decal across the back windshield.

The darkness began to thicken and grow over the interstate. I drove in silence, fearful of sad songs and a repeat of my outburst from earlier that day. At each exit, there were lights atop tall metal poles, casting pools of melon-colored light, and I kept track of distance by them rather than mile markers. In the quiet whirring of my tires against the road, I heard my stomach growl; I hadn't eaten in hours. I reached for the bag of chips in the passenger seat and peeled open the metallic bag. They weren't good, too salty.

I waited for the familiar sights and checked them off a mental list as each came into view: a billboard on top of a tree-covered hill advertising night golf at the Bull at Boone's Trace, a windowless building accompanied by a tall, lighted sign announcing "Philly's: Quality Adult Entertainment," the exit 121 sign declaring that its only attraction, cleverly named "Truck Stop," was two miles ahead on my right. I still hadn't psyched myself up enough for returning to McGregor Hall, so I decided to stop. Besides, I was hungry, and I had passed that exit probably a thousand times wondering what sorts of interesting treasures "Truck Stop" held for those not fooled by its unoriginal name.

I parked my car and counted the money left in my purse. Seven dollars. I surveyed the scene. There were two semis parked in a gravel lot to the side of the building, and there were three other cars parked, like mine, alongside the front of the building. The place was well lit, which was important even though a full darkness had yet to descend, and I wasn't the only patron.

Inside, "Truck Stop" offered a variety of goods. There were movies in dusty covers for sale along one wall. I browsed some titles; the only one I recognized was *Commando*. A young girl with big hair stood behind the counter reading *Cosmo*, and above her hung an assortment of caps. There was a coffee machine and rows of food offering the regular gas station variety. I decided to grab a drink from the cooler on the back wall first, and on my way, I found the souvenir aisle.

There were little, glitter-filled globes with brown race horses poised inside them and KENTUCKY painted across the bottom. There were playing cards with photographs of different birds on the backs. Ashtrays, covered in painted daisies, stood stacked with brown paper between each to keep from scratching the craftsmanship. Next to those was a stack of thin books titled "The Hillbilly Dic-shun-ary." There were nail clippers, tiny painted spoons, and magnets, but the best by far were the figurines.

A frog with droopy eyelids perched on a lily pad. A little girl in a pink dress smiled from her seat in a little red wagon, and several graceful horses posed on grassy patches. They were ordinary interstate wares, but they were fantastic and fascinating, forever captured in the joy of their motionless worlds.

He was the last one I found. A little boy with sandy-colored hair wearing overalls, bent at the knees, a baseball bat hoisted on his shoulder. He looked very serious as he waited for a pitch from somewhere only he could see. I carefully removed him from the shelf. He was perfect.

I tipped him upside down in search of a price. A hand-written sticker revealed he was \$5.99.

As the girl with the big hair rang me up, I scanned her open *Cosmo*. “Getting the Message Across: Letting Him Know You’re Available.” I wondered briefly if she’d ever cowered in a corner and watched people loving and hating without being a part of it. I figured there was a decent chance that she had. She wrapped my little baseball player in brown paper and put him in a plastic bag that read THANK YOU in red letters.

Armed with my purchase and my few coins of change, I pulled back onto the interstate. I felt tired, ready to get back to my room and go to bed. I considered various spaces in my tiny room that would be just right for my figurine and went back to counting the melon-colored pools of light against the last, dying streaks of the almost dark.

DON'T TURN OUT LIKE ANNIE FARRIS

She was a station of the baseball season, as surefire as ninth innings, pop flies, and our mothers' constant warnings about her: Whatever you do, don't turn out like Annie Farris. She was the only element that ever managed to captivate us more than the players. Annie Farris wore what my grandmother called 'hot pants' and chunky wedge sandals that over-defined the muscles in her calves. My adolescent friends and I had a good view of her because she sat high in the stands, near our corner but not so near that people thought she was with us. It was always clear that Annie Farris was alone.

Our mothers told us not to, but we studied her. She was old by our standards, but we also knew that she was pretty. Her hair was long, especially for her age, which we figured was about thirty-eight, and she wore most of it down while she swept the sides back off of her face. We pooled our allowances when we were twelve and bought a set of hot rollers, but instead of curls we got tangles.

She came to most of the Campbellsville High School games, and since my father is the head coach, I had my fair share of opportunities to watch her. She was unlike anyone we knew; she was single, not divorced single but on-her-own single. She'd never been married. She'd never had kids. No one knew exactly what she did for a living, and once, when I asked my mother, she told me that Annie Farris enjoyed digging for gold.

When we were twelve, Carla Hines decided we should keep a book on her. We recorded which games she attended, the details of what she wore, and the things we thought she paid attention to. She stared at the dugout a lot. She never paid much attention to the field. She hardly ever clapped, never bought concessions, never smiled, never talked to anyone.

Once, a junior named Bart Clark hit a grand slam against the Green County Dragons. (Unfortunate name, but fortunate face and body. One of our season favorites that year.) Everybody else went crazy; she just clapped, slowly bouncing one set of

fingers off the opposite palm. She still didn't smile. I wondered if she understood what had happened.

We lost our book on her when Carla moved to Hart County at the end of July that year. All those details, all our observations gone. We saw Carla three years later at a regional basketball game. She was overweight and gave us the finger as she walked past our student cheering section.

We could hold on to baseball up through July with the Babe Ruth League games, but after that, we knew the hard seasons were coming. School shopping meant cardigans, back packs, shiny plastic packets of new mechanical pencils, the leathery smell of new shoes. It also meant the trauma of starting another school year, the panic over how much harder it was going to be than the last. It was never more than we could handle, but the worrying made us tired for a while.

There was the changing of our group. Carla Hines wasn't the first to go, but she was the first one we really missed, mostly because she got away with the book. (In truth, she might have needed it more than us, a memento of good times to carry off to a strange new place with strange new people.) Megan Coolidge moved away when we were ten, but that was my father's first year as head coach, and we weren't interested enough in the teenage boys to make the baseball games and Annie Farris our rituals of friendship; besides, when you're ten, you get over things pretty easily. Jasmine McCann, who we hung out with only occasionally, moved to Greensburg when we were fourteen and became captain of their cheerleading squad. Someone invited her to their sweet sixteen party the following year, and she stayed for twenty minutes and then left with some boy who drove a red Camaro. It never occurred to us to replace the friends we lost.

But for those of us who stayed, the winter months were grueling. Even when we got our licenses, icy roads sent our fragile mothers into a shared panic. The phone was always busy because we shared sightings of the exotic Annie Farris to flex our imaginations. She'd been at Krogers, buying hamburger meat and cat food in black, high-heeled boots that zipped up to her knees. Someone saw her smoking at a stop light; she drove a beat-up maroon Ford Escort. She had come out of the Tan Shack wearing a black trench coat, which probably meant that she wasn't wearing anything underneath.

There were claims that she was walking out of the public library once loaded down with an armful of books, but I personally rejected that information. It didn't gel with the rest of our Annie Farris collection. That was something any of our mothers would do

Christmas break followed the same cycle every year. The first few days were utopian without the homework. Then, the free time became too weighty; we missed the distraction of school work. Then, with stir craziness came heightened imagination. We deferred to our cherished enigma. I started the tradition when we were thirteen. We were going to piece together our clues to Annie Farris and write her life story, a fictionalized but logically concluded biography. We each took a year, and everyone presented them at our annual gift exchange party. The chapters got handed over to me because I was a safe bet. Both of my parents were tied to the school system; we weren't going anywhere. So if anyone else pulled a Carla Hines, the faithful few who remained would have access to our work in its entirety.

Nicole Granger had the toughest job: year one. She wrote it in third person, since writing in the voice of a baby was impossible (even though she was *really* immature), and according to Nicole, Annie Farris had been born Jacinda Eloise Copenhagen in Chicago. Her parents and her two siblings moved to Kentucky and changed their names in order to escape the wrath of the mafia. At first we snickered and rolled our eyes, but when pressed for answers as to how this beginning could be discredited given what we knew about Annie, we shut our mouths.

Sara Simpson was responsible for the second year, and since she had only one sibling for Annie (something we should have discussed), we had to do some connective work. As a group, we voted that the other sibling, a sister named Rosalie Lucille, was accidentally left at a rest stop; by the time the Farris-Copenhagens realized, it was too dangerous to turn around with the mafia possibly hot on their trail. That left one brother, Roberto, who would later be renamed Julian, Julian Farris. Perfect.

Anyway, Sara's contribution was that Annie was growing into a beautiful toddler with cocoa-colored curls and eyes the color of the sea. (We were all jealous of the originality of cocoa-colored curls.) She was singing like a bird before her second birthday.

The third year was me. I placed the family in Lexington at that point, since they wouldn't be ready to jump from the big-city life of Chicago into the country quietness of

Campbellsville. That's the year Annie was enrolled in a school for gifted toddlers. She found that dancing was her passion. Since Mr. Farris had taken his mafia money and acquired one of the most famed thoroughbred horse farms, he could afford to give his daughter the most beautiful dancing costumes in the world. I described the tutus as being layered like rose petals, which obviously trumped the cocoa-colored curls.

Janet Pritchard finished us off that inaugural year with Annie Farris winning the three-year old division of the Kentucky State Fair beauty pageant. She had to do some revisions because she'd written in a jealous older sister, and we had all already decided that Roberto/Julian would be the only sibling. Janet had no original descriptions.

Before everyone left, we each made out a fact sheet with the vitals, and everyone folded them and zipped them into inside pockets of purses, away from the critical, probing eyes of mothers.

The third year of our Christmas 'reading,' in *my* basement, we got caught. I was first to go that year; Annie was eight and I was fifteen. It was the year she started to dabble in modeling and she was about to be cast for a national cereal commercial when my mother busted in from the adjoining laundry room where she had been folding clothes.

"Jillan Rose Wethington! What is this Annie Farris nonsense?" She looked over all of us, confused and disgusted. It was the first time my mother had ever looked at me like that, and I was embarrassed that she was looking at my friends the same way. The stories, the act of writing them down and hiding them from the world, had been so new and adult to us. I felt sick and hot and foolish.

My mother got her hands on only my chapter; everyone else had the good sense to hide them. But they never turned them over to me to put with the chapters from previous years. My mother gave us the most specific lecture that day. She dispensed her eye contact evenly among us all and said that Annie Farris was "an unsavory character." She told us that Annie Farris was the opposite of everything we should want to grow up to be. "Have you ever, *ever* seen her with anyone other than her scantily-clad, painted-up self?"

Our left-to-right headshakes, indicating a unanimous but fear-inspired no, were synchronized.

"Her mother was a drunk, her father never cared about that family, and Annie Farris sees men as prey and nothing more." My mother's face turned red; she gulped at

the air and dropped the laundry basket to the floor. She was really getting worked up. “Annie Farris will be lonely forever and ever because she doesn’t know what love is. She will never find a husband and she will never have a family. Is that how you girls want to live? *Is it?*” My mother rubbed her eyes with both hands. We were all holding our breath. “I should think not.”

She hoisted that laundry basket under her arm, and we thought it was over. I had already turned back toward my friends. But my mother offered one last dictum before retreating upstairs: “Whatever you do, don’t turn out like Annie Farris.”

Sixteen was a big year for me. I started driving even though I didn’t get my own car. My mother was reluctant to hand over the keys to the Jeep Cherokee; freedom was more infrequent than I had anticipated.

One of the highlights of the year was being asked to prom by Kellyn Dowell. (Kellyn was the only person I had ever known named Kellyn. It fit him.) He was a starter on my father’s pitching staff, and we had watched him all year long, right along with Annie Farris. My father decided to move the home dugout from the third base side to the first base side that year, which meant that we switched from the first base side to the third. We had to sit opposite the home dugout in order to see what went on inside that cinder-block structure. Annie moved with us.

Nicole Granger was the first of us to undergo the rite of passage from fan to girlfriend. She made out with Jack Stafford after the Winter Wonderland dance, and our group was forever changed. We expanded. Boys began to travel with us in the halls between classes, to the stiff cushioning of the foldout seats of the cinema, to the far corners of the county before curfew.

And even though Jack Stafford saw little to no actual playing time, he was inseparable from his more talented baseball teammates. So we became intermeshed with those figures we had watched from the far corners of the bleachers. But with those boys came other girls, strange, quasi-exotic, often jaded girls whom we’d avoided in the cafeteria, whispered about in study halls, and envied at pep rallies. Eventually, we loaned them lip gloss and traded stories about the group of boys we shared in common,

but nothing more. There was a rift sixteen years in the making, as sure and unstoppable as the spring's annual gift of baseball.

Originally, Kellyn was a package deal with Candace Sherman. She was the only girl in Taylor County to graduate from modeling classes. She was supposedly in some exclusive, high-end clothing catalogue, but none of us ever saw it. Of all the girls we were forced to be around, she was the one I liked least, not because of Kellyn but because she smoked menthol cigarettes and looked at us funny. At least everyone else was willing to laugh on occasion.

Kellyn dumped her at the end of January because she'd gone to a college party, gotten wasted, and slept with, ironically enough, a sophomore on the college baseball team, third basemen Jacob Loy from Jellico, Tennessee. (Nice muscles, decent batting average, bad acne.) From then on, we only saw Candace at school, in passing. My mother, who somehow knew the personal business of all of dad's players, especially the stars, said that Candace Sherman was on the road to be the next Annie Farris; I strongly disagreed.

Let me get back to Kellyn's newfound singleness at the end of January. Nicole and Jack pushed their buddy to find a new love, and through the magic of double dates and grapevine messages, we became 'an item.' My mother was thrilled, my father, guarded. Kellyn ate dinner at our house a lot, and eventually, we were allowed to watch movies in the furnished basement. Our almost-sexual activity progressed in leaps. When we finally discovered the absolutely pleasing sensation of pressing our mouths together and tasting each other, that lasted about a week. Once my 34-B breasts became coveted treasures, all was right with the world.

When he asked me to prom, my mother told me she was proud of me, a rare doling out of approval. Nicole and I would be going together with our dates, and we invited Sara Simpson and the strange boy she was seeing (I think his name was Roger) from the neighboring town of Columbia. Janet Pritchard was skipping prom for some rock concert her cousin had tickets to up in Cincinnati.

We went dress shopping as a group, with our mothers. I was surprised when my mother held up a strapless, fitted gown with a sprinkling of beads across the breasts and a slit that came well above my knee. She declared it was a lovely shade of periwinkle and

ordered me to try it on. I loved it and she loved it. She even agreed to have bra cups sewn into the lining for an added lift at the top.

Sara settled on bright pink with metallic silver beading, and Nicole fought with her mother and won out with a very short satin number in lime green. Separately, we all looked very nice that night, but as a group, we looked like Easter eggs.

Earlier I said that one of the highlights of the year was being asked to the prom by Kellyn Dowell. Prom night itself was the main highlight, but it had to do with someone other than Kellyn. That prom night was the one and only time in my life that I ever talked to Annie Farris.

It was in the ladies' restroom of the Cumberland House Restaurant that I came face-to-face with her. I had accidentally spilled my Diet Coke on my sexpot periwinkle dress, and I rushed to the bathroom (twisting my hips and inching forward because I couldn't take a normal stride in all that tight material) in embarrassment and tears. The lighting was terrible, an orange haze that made my vision thick and unclear. My mascara was starting to run, and any minute I expected Sara and Nicole to burst through the door in all their Easter-egg splendor and save me from what was supposed to be one of the greatest nights of my life.

I stood in front of the spotted square of mirror and assessed myself, fallen from the grace of glamour; I heard the swoosh of the swinging door but ignored it. I dabbed at my eyes with the course paper towels from the dispenser, and I noticed a form, a person standing still, out of the corner of my eye. I turned and faced Annie Farris, studying me.

"What?" I didn't mean to be rude, but I was. She was in a short black dress and gold hoop earrings. She had the sides of her hair pulled back, like always. The color *did* remind me of cocoa.

She hesitated and then spoke. "Aren't you Bill Wethington's, Coach Wethington's daughter?" She still didn't smile.

"Yeah. That's me." I offered nothing else.

"It's Jillian, isn't it?"

How did she know my name? That put a curious hitch in my bitchiness. I didn't respond.

"I know your father; that's how I know your name. In case you were wondering." She didn't smile, but her face looked different, lighter. "He talks about you a lot. At

least he does when I'm around him, which isn't all that much anymore." She was fidgeting with her handbag. "We're old friends; I've known him since high school."

"Oh." I had no idea my father knew Annie Farris and vice versa. Had I kept writing the biography, I would never have thought to write him into the former Jacinda Copenhagen's high school years, not Bill Wethington who owned an electric nose hair trimmer and sometimes passed gas as he dozed on the couch in front of the TV. I could feel my breasts sliding down, below the firm cups sewn into my dress. I glanced down at them instinctively and saw that Annie was wearing stilettos; they had to be six-inch heels. "I like your shoes," I said and looked back up into her face.

"My father was a baseball man himself," she said. "He played in college, at Western. When he divorced my mother and moved down to Laurel County, he coached at one of the high schools down there."

"Which one?" I hadn't meant to ask because I wasn't familiar with any of the high schools in Laurel County. I wasn't sure exactly where that was; I just knew it was south of us. It just seemed like the right question to keep the conversation going. I knew I wanted it to keep going.

"Oh I don't know. I didn't see him anymore after that. I was pretty little when he left. But I do remember he always listened to the Cincinnati Reds on the radio. He loved those Reds." She edged past me to look in the mirror. She removed a tube of lipstick from her purse and reapplied a healthy layer of dark burgundy hue. They weren't very full, but they were perfectly shaped. Her open mouth looked like a Valentine.

"My dad's a Cubs man. I wouldn't care if I never listened to or watched another Cubs game as long as I live." I must have sounded very bitter.

"But I see you at a lot of the games. You must like baseball at least a little bit."

"I do," I said, "when I know the guys playing it."

"I see," she said. "Sounds like me."

"But I see you at a lot of the high school games every season. Who do you know?"

She inhaled before speaking. "I remember watching your father play in high school." She laughed and stared into the tiny mirror. "He always made a ton of errors in the field, but no one cared. He crushed that ball every time. Your father is the only player I've ever watched in person who hit three grand slams." She reached up and

smoothed a curl back into place. “Bill was something else on a ball field. He was always something else wherever he went.”

Then, for the first time, she smiled, just a little bit and for less than a second. Annie Farris had a thing for my father. I had a million questions. Was it just a crush, or did they ever date? How long and how long ago? What did she think of my mother? And as my mind asked that question, my heart went out to Annie Farris instead of my curiosity. The motive behind my mother’s warnings made sense, but then again, it didn’t. My mother went home to my father every night, and she was still jealous, guarded, angry about an old high school flame that might or might not have been. I decided that Annie had loved my father, and she studied him in the dugout the way we studied her. They must have had something significant for her to still watch him, silent and devoted, after all that time had passed.

I wanted to tell her to take him. I wanted to tell her that he was wonderful and he deserved romance, hot pants and trench coats and thigh-high boots instead of the Campbellsville PTA and frumpy skirts with floral prints. I felt guilty about it; I knew that wasn’t the way I was supposed to feel. But my mother had a routine and rules; I knew I wanted to be as far away from that as possible as an adult. And I knew that Annie Farris fit that description.

I remained silent. Annie grabbed a fistful of paper towels from the dispenser, balled them up, dampened them just barely under the trickle of water from the sink, and adjusted me so that she could clearly see the drying, syrup-colored outline of my diet coke stain. She rubbed at it.

“I like your dress,” she said. She went over the stain about twenty times and threw the paper towels in the trash. “It’ll dry light. Take it to the drycleaners first thing Monday morning.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Who’s the lucky date?” she asked.

The question snapped me back to the present, and I cringed. “Kellyn Dowell. He probably thinks I’m a clumsy dork, and if he does, he’s right.”

“Might he be one of those guys you know who makes you enjoy all those baseball games I’ve seen you at?”

“Yeah.” I grinned a little bit, I think. And I will never forget what she said to me next.

“No matter what anybody says, prom is like anything else: it isn’t going to be perfect.” She paused. “And don’t spend your life chasing baseball men. They’re always distracted by one thing or another, and it’s never you.”

A large woman swung through the door at that moment and wedged into one of the two empty stalls. And as if it were her cue, Annie Farris was gone. I took a few deep breaths. I understood what she meant about things not being perfect, and I wished someone had told me before then. It made so much more sense than my mother’s world of white roses and garters, rhinestones and dyed shoes.

As I walked back to the table, I felt sad and a lot older.

The night went on. We went to the gym, which looked like someone had eaten about fifty roles of tin foil and then vomited all over the place. Kellyn and I only danced to slow songs. He let his hands rest at the small of my back, and I felt better, even though I kept thinking of him as a baseball man. I made several trips to the girls’ bathroom, and once, I was at the mirror next to Candace Sherman. She was attempting to be graceful as she extracted a booger from her nose. I knew I shouldn’t be watching, but I couldn’t help but stare. When she was finished, she wiped it on the underside of the counter top. She stared me full in the face. “Fuck you,” she said and waltzed out. I thought about Annie and decided to let it go.

The dance was over at 1:00 a.m., and we called Janet from a payphone. She wasn’t home from the concert yet. Kellyn and Jack had wine coolers stashed in the trunk, and we had an hour before curfew. We drove out into the darkness, parked up on the hill by the animal shelter, and drank as fast as we could. Then, each couple went their separate way.

Our way was back to my house, where I found my dad asleep on the couch. I woke him up to let him know I was home, and he went to bed. I retrieved Kellyn from his waiting spot on the front porch after ten minutes passed with no sounds of stirring parents. I snuck him up to my room, and we had sex on my floor because we were both afraid the bed would creak. It was painful and clumsy, and I waited until he left before I cried.

I never asked my dad about knowing Annie Farris, and I certainly never mentioned it to my mother. I understood that my conversation with Annie was meant to go no further than us, and I felt the same way about whatever she had with my father. My mother didn't really have much of a place in any of it, so there was no reason to get her riled up. And I can now say that I agree with my mother's warnings. No one should want to turn out like Annie Farris. But it isn't because of who she is; it is because of what she can't have.

The Coke stain is faint but still visible on my dress, and I'm glad. It's the last piece of my Annie collection and my most coveted treasure.

GENERAL ADMISSION

Three days after the Boston Red Sox ended an eighty-six-year curse by winning the World Series, Christine Davis sat quietly and dry-eyed in the Maplewood Funeral Home. What bothered her the most was how the chapel of the funeral home had seemed too colorful for the events that it housed. Red carpet. Stained-glass windows. Pews upholstered in blue. A sea of flowers, some spray painted extravagant colors, and bright ribbons and bows. A rainbow room, like a kaleidoscope. All those colors had made it difficult to cry. And when the service was over, as the family had filed past the casket, she'd squeezed her mother's hand tight, felt the heaving of her body through the spastic movement of her wrist and forearm. Christine had thought to herself, *this is the last chance I'll ever have to look at my father's face*. But she didn't, couldn't. She'd kept her head bowed and fixed her eyes on the gathered fabric of the lining that peeked above each side of the casket like cake icing.

On the way to the Brookshire Memorial Cemetery, Christine spied on people whose lives seemed normal that day. People walked their dogs along Lebanon Avenue and went in and out of Bell's Bakery. There were kids running through the playground at the elementary school, throwing their small hands into the air as if it were the best moment of their lives. And then there were two elderly men tottering up the stairs of the small Baptist church on the corner of Main and Hollis. It was the men more than the church that made her think about God.

She had always thought of God as a smiling, gray-headed old man with a beard, sheathed in a sparkling gold robe. She traced this image back to a cartoon she'd watched as a child in the basement of the Campbellsville Christian Church during Sunday school; the idea that a splendid, loving God (who was quite a snazzy dresser) had cemented in her mind. She didn't pray every day, nor was she in church every Sunday. But she hadn't

doubted that God had been somewhere very far away (too far away to ever see or touch), watching out for her best interests and running the world according to His grand scheme.

So as they lowered the sealed casket into the ground, Christine wasn't angry at God. She was furious with herself for believing in a cartoon God for all those years. Really, it was a guise for giving purpose to the tragedies of life, a way of making the unpleasant patches of reality a means to an end of happiness. "You've got cancer? God has a plan for you to make the most of your time here." Or "You can never have children? Well, it's God's will for you to adopt a child who has no home." Even "Why were the Red Sox cursed until 2004? It was God's design to test the devotion of the Sox Nation and reward them in the end."

She wouldn't return to her cramped dorm room at the University of Louisville until the start of the spring semester in January, and she spent the early part of that winter forgetting God. She stayed in the house for two days after the funeral, shuffling among all the casseroles and glazed hams people had brought to her mother's kitchen and the warm, safe space of her bed. On the third day, she crawled out from under the blankets and pillows and washed the grease and tangles out of her hair. She cleaned her ears with a Q-tip.

Clad only in her bathrobe, she stepped out onto the back porch. The chilled air swirled against her skin and through the partitions of wet hair that left her scalp exposed. The bare branches of the trees looked arthritic against a gray sky, and if she had stared out at them for more than a few seconds, she would have been forced to register for the first time the weight of permanent loss.

Instead, she went inside to get dressed and face the day. She started by rummaging through a basket of perfectly folded laundry her mother had left at the foot of her bed. Her fingertips felt screenprinting that had been cracked from too much wear and cotton that had been thinned with time, and she tugged at it from the bottom of the pile. Her efforts yielded her Richmond Braves baseball t-shirt. She smiled for the first time in over a week at this tangible reminder that something she dearly loved was awaiting its annual rebirth. Her mind began to delight in countless innings of live minor league baseball with her father, and she was surprised that unlike so many other things – photographs, items of her father's clothing, old gifts from him scattered across the top of

her dresser, her widowed mother with plum-colored crescents under each eye – baseball was something that didn't hurt.

She slipped into the shirt and couldn't help but grin as she moved toward her old desk. The shoebox of baseball cards was still in the bottom drawer, waiting like an old friend. Each card was in its clear, plastic protector, and she thumbed through the rubber-banded piles of ten until she found the face of Tucker "Tuck" Simpson, pitcher for the Richmond Braves, the AAA affiliate of her father's beloved Atlanta Braves. She hadn't thought about him in months.

One card showed the lanky right-handed middle reliever on the mound, one leg crooked up against his body before he hurled his signature pitch, "The Thing," at some helpless batter. In another card, he smiled and held his custom glove at his side, and in a third, he was down on one knee, trying to look as serious as possible. She'd seen him pitch live three times against Louisville. The first time she saw him walk on the field, even before she saw him pitch, Christine knew that he would be her favorite player. She studied him. His movements revealed that he was perpetually in awe of having the good fortune to play professional baseball, and the only time he appeared not to be moving through a dream was when he was on the pitcher's mound. His dreamlike sheen and humble relaxation on the mound made him endearing. Remembering that he was something the world had to offer felt like discovering him all over again.

In the following months, Christine spent whole days with Tuck Simpson. She printed every picture of him she could find on the Internet. She trimmed them and pasted them on sheets patterned with stars, stripes, baseballs, and mitts. "Tuck Simpson: Young God of Baseball" was her theme, and scrapbooking required nothing more than considering how to make him look as good as possible on every page. All she had to do was cut, pick a background, add some glue, maybe a decorative sticker, all according to her own grand scrapbooking scheme.

After about six or so perfectly designed pages, she felt like being with people again. She went out to eat lunch with her mother at the crowded barbeque restaurant in town. She wore a skirt. She smiled at familiar faces and nearly finished an entire rack of ribs.

"You seem really good today," her mother said.

“You do too,” Christine said, her fingertips coated in barbeque sauce, and she gave her mother a genuine smile.

“I think it’s great that you’ve found a hobby.”

“Yeah?” Christine had done some of her pages at the dining room table, but she didn’t think her mother had paid much attention.

“Yeah. I’d like to see some of your pages. I’ve been thinking of giving it a try myself, at least until the warm weather gets here and I can work on my landscaping.”

January came and Christine packed her car and drove back to school and something that felt like a former life in Louisville; the scrapbook occupied the passenger seat. Massive runs to Michael’s Crafts for supplies became a biweekly event. She loved the perfectly organized and categorized aisles where she always met middle-aged moms carefully selecting the elements of birthday scrapbooks for kids probably named Sue Ellen or Jimmy. She found herself approaching these women, whom she would have barely noticed a year ago, and talking to them. She recommended scrapbook design guides and discussed which protective page covers actually held up the best while they nodded their short, layered haircuts in serious consideration.

Christine’s roommate that semester, a girl named Amy from Shepherdsville, was blonde and bright and lived in her own bubble most of the time. At first, she had liked the scrapbooking. She would leaf through the patriotic and baseball-themed backgrounds and match sets of stickers and borders with them. She thought Tuck was “eye candy” and that his legs looked amazing in the tight uniform. But, Amy’s attention span was limited when it came to everything.

“Why are you always working on that thing?” she asked on Valentine’s Day when she returned home from a sappy movie to find Christine Indian style on the floor with a half-eaten box of Russell Stover’s and a new page of Tuck in progress.

“Tuck makes me happy.” Christine bit into a strawberry crème and savored it for a moment. “And I think one day he might have a shot at the big leagues.”

“Oh. Have you ever met him or anything?”

“Nope.” Christine held the edge of a picture with her fingernail as she coated the back of it with a glue stick.

After an awkward pause, Amy asked, “Are you gonna send him that book or something?”

“Are you serious? What would he do with it?” Christine smoothed the glue-coated photo onto the page, grabbed a chocolate truffle from the candy box, and looked directly into Amy’s eyes, waiting for her answers.

“Are you okay?” Crinkles had formed in Amy’s tanned forehead.

“Yeah. I’m fine. I’m great. Why are you looking at me like that?”

Amy took a deep breath. “You don’t ever go out unless you’re going to class or going to get stuff for that scrapbook. I never see you doing homework or watching TV or anything. The only people you see are me and your mom if she comes to visit. You’re still awake when I go to bed, and you’re already up when my alarm goes off in the morning. You’ve been wearing those jeans for three weeks, and . . .”

“So what? Not everybody needs eight hours of sleep.” Christine bent forward and lifted her knee to meet her nose. “These jeans don’t even stink. You never wash your black pants; you just Febreeze them every Friday night. Plus, I save a lot of money not going out to the eighteen-and-over bars every weekend.”

“You know what I mean, Christine.” Amy’s voice revealed her exasperation.

“Other than the fact that I don’t make the rounds downtown and we don’t share an identical sleep schedule, I don’t see how we’re all that different. Besides, it’s not like you haven’t helped out with a page or two of this scrapbook.” Christine grabbed her scissors and another set of freshly printed Tuck pictures from the internet, signaling that the conversation was finished.

After that encounter, Amy started trying to get Christine to talk about things. She’d make suggestions like, “Let’s go have a Diet Coke and just chat.” Chat? That was one of her mother’s verbs, an action from a bygone era. Time chatting was time better spent arranging images of Tuck on her perfect pages. Everything had to be spaced and ordered just right or the design came out looking like a very talented sixth grader’s attempt at art.

In order to avoid Amy’s interrogations, Christine started sneaking around. She’d stay up doing homework until Amy was soundly asleep and slide her plastic tub of supplies out from under her tiny bed and into the bright lights of the hallway. The only

interruption there was an occasional girl headed for the bathroom at the end of the hall, too tired and grumpy to do anything but step around Christine's makeshift studio.

When her mother would visit, they still never talked about her father. They went out to very average chain restaurants and got too full on appetizers. They carried chicken finger platters and second-rate fettuccini Alfredo home in Styrofoam take-out boxes. Her mother always conveniently forgot to take hers home, another good meal for her daughter to warm in the microwave.

Right before Margaret Davis would leave to return to her empty house, Christine would bring out the scrapbook and the box. She'd offer up her latest pages and point out why one was superior to another, perhaps because of how the pictures were arranged or because of a new patterned paper she'd found, and update her mother on Tuck's stats.

In return, her mother offered a sad smile and said she hoped Christine's studies weren't suffering because of things, and then she was gone.

On a drizzly Wednesday night in May, hardly anyone had come out for the first game of the season that brought the Richmond Braves to town. But, like Christine, the few fans scattered throughout Slugger Field seemed happy to be there. The light rain had frizzed her hair so she'd worn a Braves cap to keep it controlled and concealed. It was too wet to buy a program, so she settled for a hamburger, ketchup only, which she ate in large bites.

The game was delayed 45 minutes. She was a little disappointed that the weather had cut warm-ups short and that she had yet to see Tuck. But knowing that he was somewhere at this same field, watching the same curtain of mist wrap around the park made her feel very alive.

Louisville scored in the bottom of the first, and other than that, it was a quiet ballgame, quick but graceful, like a ballet on dirt and grass. As soon as a recording of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" began to play for the seventh inning stretch, Christine stood to join the faithful few in singing. She stretched and took a deep breath; a very heavy scent of cologne greeted her. As the recording demanded its peanuts and Cracker Jacks, Christine looked around, expecting to find a tired businessman in a suit and loosened tie behind her, perhaps having a beer. Or an old man, maybe, fighting with the

rain to keep a scorecard. But there was no one. The closest people were about five rows in front of her, a teenage couple who had been there since the first pitch.

And then she realized that the smell was very familiar, but she couldn't place it. It was so palpable that she might have cupped her hand and swept it through the damp air and come up with a handful of cologne-scented fluff, colored a bright green or electric blue like the bottles of liquids and gels in her father's side of the medicine cabinet. She tried to discard that image as quickly as it had come; she hadn't tried, hadn't wanted to conjure any images of her father. And as she fought her own mind, she knew what the smell was—Aqua Velva, her father's favorite aftershave. Rather than excitement or confusion or fear, she felt shame at not knowing what it was sooner. It hadn't even been a year and already it was harder to remember what her father smelled like.

By that time, the white-gold brilliance of the stadium lights illuminated everything. She had a heightened awareness of things happening around her. Christine could hear the gritty scrape of cleats in the infield dirt, even from where she sat. The players stretched themselves into elegant, muscular shapes as they fielded grounders and connected with great, swooping arcs that ended in the gloves of outfielders. As the fielders moved to their dugout for the top of the eighth, she heard her name. Surely the voice was internal; she was trying to calm her overly observant senses. That was it – she was attempting to discard the ridiculous possibilities that were starting to creep in from the far edges of her mind.

But they wouldn't be quieted or halted, and once she was willing to accept it, she knew what it was. Her father. She felt a pressure behind her eyes, the urge to cry. But that would be wasting an opportunity that might never come again. She whispered in her head, keeping her lips very still.

Dad?

Richmond looks good this year. He sounded the same.

Christine put her fingertips to her lips to hide her smile. She moved her eyes left and right to see if anyone else could see or hear what was going on. It took her a few seconds to respond. *I bet they bring Tuck in for the ninth. It's only a two-run lead. It's a save situation.*

Good ole Tuck. I think he's got a shot at getting called up to the big club soon. That bullpen could use a young arm.

Is Atlanta still your team, Dad? It was very important to Christine that her father answer yes to this question.

Of course it is! You changing major league affiliations on me? Just don't tell me you've converted to the American League; the designated hitter ruins the game.

Christine could tell by the tone that her father was smiling as he said this, and she got a picture in her head as clear and sharp as the game in front of her. *I'm still an Atlanta girl. But I'm mostly a Tuck Simpson girl,* she added.

And then a possibility floated into the space where her father's face was so clear. *Can I understand you because I'm going to die?* The whole idea had come so fast that she wasn't able to censor it.

If that were the case, then everybody here would understand me. Everybody dies, baby girl.

Christine felt her muscles relaxing at the familiar frustration of a father-daughter talk. *Am I going to die soon, dad?*

I certainly hope not.

She felt stung. Didn't death mean being reunited with loved ones? Didn't he think it would be nice to see her all the time and not just at AAA minor league baseball games? She was curious. And jealous. There were probably lots of people-spirits who were with her father all the time in a mystical somewhere. She chewed her lip as she brooded over why life and death were such mutually exclusive places, and as the corner of her tooth caught the flesh too forcefully, she remembered her visitor.

Dad?

There was no response. She held her breath for a few seconds and felt hot pools gathering at the corners of her eyes. The muscles in her throat became painfully stiff. He was gone. Her father, she thought, had slipped back to wherever he'd been since last October. She felt guilty that she had been unwilling to talk about him or even think about him for close to six months because she'd been so scared of hurting. She had turned her back on it all, but he had still come. He was willing to forgive her.

But had she waited too long to accept it, been too selfish, gotten lost in her own thoughts? Maybe it had been the fact that she hadn't really known what to say to him next. But, she thought, do you ever know what you're going to say or even do next? Was life just a series of unpremeditated events?

She focused on the game that sprawled before her so as not to cry in front of the teenage couple or the few other patrons of section 107. The gloriousness of baseball she was willing to share with them, but not her personal grief. With one out in the bottom of the eighth, Tuck Simpson began warming up in the bullpen.

She watched his high leg kick, the strange grimace he made as he hurled his right arm forward. She looked at his sideburns and his very large ears. He always wore his socks high, like the old ballplayers. That was one of the reasons Christine's father had found him worthy of her praise. Such a small thing, really. She was finally able to swallow. She felt better, almost lucky.

And Tuck had been brilliant, as usual. Three up, three down. That was the disadvantage of having a talented closing pitcher as your favorite player: he wasn't on the field very long. She sat still at the end of the game, watching the teams shake hands. She waited until Tuck had disappeared into the clubhouse, until there was no chance left of seeing him anymore. She left the stadium that night alternately believing in and discrediting a collection of things she couldn't define.

Over the next several weeks, Christine moved her belongings into a new dorm room for the duration of the summer session.

Amy returned home for the summer, but not before reiterating her advice. "You have got to get out more," she told Christine. "Go to more baseball games. Go to the bookstore and look in the sports section. Go downtown to the Louisville Slugger Museum. At least you'll see people and get out of these dark dorm rooms."

And Christine took her advice. She decided to go somewhere off campus everyday for at least an hour. She decided to try a small neighborhood park she'd noticed once on her way to a craft supply store. It turned out to be a playground and a set of t-ball and little league fields. As the gravel of the parking lot crackled underneath her tires, she'd felt the excitement of being somewhere new. But as she started toward the small crowd gathered on the tiers of wooden bleachers, panic seized her. She didn't know any of these people. What if they tried to talk to her? What would she say to them? She didn't know any of the kids playing. How would she explain what she was doing there? Or worse, what if they just stared at her? What made her think she belonged

here? Minor league games were larger; if you bought your ticket, you belonged. This was different, smaller. These people probably all knew one another. She felt very alone for the first time and stood for a moment, listening to the shouts and cheers before starting back toward her car in defeat.

As she flipped through the pages of her scrapbook that night, she grew relaxed and calm as she reread the articles and looked at the familiar pictures. She knew the picture of Tuck signing autographs at the South Georgia Antique Mall. She knew the article about his fourteen tattoos was on page seventeen, and the interview about his guitar and surfing obsessions was on thirty-six. For a moment, the solution seemed simple; take the scrapbook with her on her outings.

But the scrapbook was fragile with its pasted cutouts and the hours of valuable time it had absorbed. Christine needed something to carry with her, in the car and the bottom of her backpack during her daily excursion. She made a trip that night to purchase a small wooden box and a bottle of bright blue craft paint. She glued on baseball patches and trimmed the lid with red satin ribbon.

Over the next few days, she found precious trinkets. A keychain that spelled T-U-C-K-E-R in wooden bubble letters, a once-in-a-lifetime find in a Cracker Barrel General Store. Her three Tucker Simpson minor league baseball cards which she had brought back to school with her back in January. A pack of personalized ink pens she'd bought at Wal-Mart, each with black letters down the side that read "FRED." Fred was Tucker's middle name (actually it was Frederick, but the shortened version was all they had). Close enough. Tucker wasn't a common name, which made it all the more appealing. And finally, one minor league baseball ticket stub denoting a match-up between the Louisville Bats and the Richmond Braves. Her portable shrine to Tuck Simpson was a work in progress.

The Richmond Braves weren't back in town until late June. When she had finally parked the car at Slugger Field, she took a deep breath and stretched her hand toward the back, passenger-side floor board. She felt the satin ribbon trim on her fingertips and was satisfied that her shrine was safe and intact.

At the will-call window, a sour-looking woman in a Bats cap and jersey handed Christine two tickets in section 107. When they reached her hand, she felt an electric flutter in her heart, a current of extravagant hope so strong that it made her light-headed for a moment.

At the turnstile before entering the park, she handed her ticket to the man in the green smock. As she stood at the edge of the concourse, she looked out over the stadium. A midsummer mass sprawled before her, people packed into this cathedral stadium to worship this game. She watched people passing peanuts and sipping frothy, golden beers, and for a minute, it looked like a splendid communion.

Baseball was worth believing in. Even if the score wasn't what she wanted by the end of nine innings (or more if she were lucky), she still got to watch the carefully considered movements and decisions of these players, until they weren't even theirs anymore. The game became something bigger, something separate, something that included the thousands looking down on it. There were no time restraints, no clocks running down. It ran according to no one's scheme. Baseball had as much time as it needed.

She made her way to seat 3C, settled in to the hard plastic chair three rows back from the field, and searched for Tuck. He wasn't in the general area of the bullpen. She leaned forward to look toward the visiting dugout. She found him talking with a coach, arms crossed. His cap sat off-center on his head. She felt light-headed.

As Tuck laughed at the coach's final words and turned to walk in her general direction wearing a grin, she could see that the tooth next to his front left one was slightly crooked. His ears were larger in person than they appeared in photographs. He took a seat in a folding chair in the bullpen, which in this minor league park was sandwiched right up against the stands. Her proximity to the living, breathing Tuck was excruciating. She had to control herself and her facial expressions. She had to focus on something else, in case he was omniscient and could see her thoughts.

She people-watched, and that made her nervous. If someone were crammed in beside her, her father might not come. She didn't understand how this thing worked, but she knew it hinged on spaces. Everything in a baseball park hinged on spaces: fair or foul, strike or ball, covering ninety feet on a sacrifice fly. The ump had to be positioned just so to see a close play. If the center fielder moved over three feet, he'd get a better

jump on the ball and the inning would be over. Baseball was all about where a person was at any given moment, and she knew that he'd never visit her anywhere else but here, in this ballpark.

By the bottom of the seventh, Louisville had a six-run lead, and there were no signs, no scents. "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" passed without event. She could see the back of Tuck's head as he sat in a folding chair in the bullpen, waiting for the command to warm up.

But the game progressed and still he sat. Every once in a while, he'd turn to look at something, the source of a shout from the dugout or a foul ball gliding out of play over first base, and she could see his profile. After Richmond's at-bat in the eighth, Louisville was still ahead by six; there was nothing Tuck could save in this game.

After the last out, she watched the handshaking ceremony of sportsmanship. Following her ritual, she kept her seat as Tuck shook some hands and removed his cap to wipe the sweat from his brow. She didn't move until he disappeared into the dugout. Her limbs felt heavy as she walked back to her car.

Before fastening her seatbelt, she reached back to the blue box with the satin ribbon and baseball patch. She opened it and set it in the passenger seat. She reached into the back pocket of her jeans and pulled out her ticket stub and the other ticket with both of its sections still joined perfectly at the perforated line. They were only slightly curved from being sat on during nine innings. She dropped them into the box and then fingered the wooden keychain before replacing the lid.

The next morning, Christine finished checking her e-mail in her dark, cramped dorm room as the small television mumbled in the background. Just a message from her mother asking if she planned on finally coming home for a visit this weekend and were there any old clothes she wanted to take to the consignment store for extra money. As an incentive, her mother had written that she could use the money for scrapbooking supplies. She could be so random sometimes.

She had almost an hour to kill before it would be time to walk over to her summer class in mythology. She typed in the address for the Richmond Braves website, and the headline was the first thing she saw once the page loaded. "**Tuck Simpson Called Up to Atlanta After First Game in Series Against Louisville.**" She blinked, her fingers

poised over the keyboard. As the meaning behind the bold blue type set in, an anger from deep inside caught her off guard.

There would be no more driving across town to watch him play. She felt her ownership of Tuck Simpson slipping. He had been called up. He was now a part of the Big Show, a phrase that had always made her think more of a circus than baseball. This new distance between the two of them interrupted the ritual, *her* ritual. She felt the familiar pressure behind her eyes.

She hoisted her backpack over her shoulders and moved quickly to ward off tears; she needed to get outside of the little room. She counted the seconds in the elevator—forty-one. She rushed past the cheap furniture of the lobby and out into the sunlight. She walked fast, past the student union and bookstore, into the courtyard. She wanted to sit by the fountain.

She didn't want to have to think, so she watched. She people watched. And what she found was that about six different people who walked by might have been her. Not tall or short but somewhere in the middle. Some were wearing baseball caps, pulled low to hide their eyes. She did that sometimes. One girl rushed past with her head down, eyes glued to the pavement in front of her. Christine knew that walk, knew the girl just wanted to be alone and not have to put the effort into meeting other people's eyes. Everyone's backpacks bounced against their backs with the quick rhythm of their steps, and they were all scurrying to class, sacrificing their summers, using school to escape one thing or another—late graduation, a minimum wage job, moving back home to families, dealing with the real world.

And as her imagination worked to connect her with these passersby, it presented her with a new idea. There were other girls with other dead fathers and other needy mothers. There were other girls who had other Tuck Simpsons. There were other fans, millions of them, some who never sat on the first base side and some who wore the same socks to every game. Baseball was bigger than all the others.

Everything is getting bigger, she thought, everything is growing. It was that limitlessness that allowed it to expand; baseball and change were both infinite. Tucks and fathers and cartoon gods would come and go, but not baseball. And because baseball never left, the people who loved it and played it could never completely leave a person

behind. Baseball was something Christine could see and touch and hear and smell; there was no room for doubt.

She felt electric and alive. She felt like maybe, just maybe, life was at least a little better than okay because there were rituals and escapes, things a person could really love, things like baseball. Christine slipped off her flip-flops, rolled the bottoms of her jeans up to her knees, and stepped into the fountain.

It wasn't cold like she'd expected, but it felt cool. She nudged a penny with her big toe and dipped her cupped hands into the water. She sprinkled it over her arms. She decided she'd skip class, just this one time, to drive down by the stadium and buy a ticket for that night's game.

FOUR AND A HALF INNINGS

The north Florida sun swelled and blistered in the sky, making the day all bright yellows with patches of soft blue. Below it, the Eagles of Tallahassee Community College, on their home baseball diamond, took on the Commodores of Gulf Coast Community College.

Lawrence Pruitt, armed with a Ziploc bag of sunflower seeds he'd packed at home, made his way to an open spot in the bleachers and sat down carefully. Within minutes, dark rings of sweat began to form on his navy blue t-shirt at his neck and under each arm, and beads of perspiration caught the sunshine and sort of twinkled on the pink skin that met his receding hairline.

He watched the field carefully because he was sorry he'd missed the first inning and a half. The Eagles were up to bat in the bottom of the second. "Look alive!" a fan yelled from the somewhere on the first base side, and he thought it was a strange statement to make at a baseball game, even though he'd heard it in that context and setting at least a thousand times.

They looked very alive, he thought. The defensive players were poised, hunched, prepared. Their cap bills shadowed their eyes, but Lawrence could tell, even from where he sat, that they were focused on the batter's every twitch and gesture. They were still, but their kinetic potential, ready to spring forth in instantaneous reaction, made them even more alive than if they had been running full force.

And as he studied the crouched infielders, the batter connected to send a rope down the third base line, right in front of his eyes. The third baseman was ready, just as Lawrence had predicted, and he leaped through the air, stretching his body into a perfectly horizontal band to catch the ball for the first out in the bottom of the second. Gloved

beautifully, Lawrence thought even though it sent the home team back out to the field. He didn't really care who won or lost; he wasn't rooting for or against anyone.

The top of the third went by with two base runners but no runs scored, and as the Eagles retreated to their dugout and the Commodores trotted out to defend their respective posts, a man, in a hurry to find a seat, slipped on Lawrence's piling of sunflower seed shells and spilled a good portion of his Coke in a dark, sticky puddle on Lawrence's feet.

"Shit. I'm sorry, man. I wasn't paying attention," the man said.

"I should apologize to you," Lawrence answered. "I should have been scraping these shells off to the ground." He made a gesture of scooting his foot across the metal bleacher.

"No, no, I should have watched where I was going." He turned sideways to face Lawrence and move past him to take the seat next to him. "I got stuck in traffic over on Tennessee Street and got into a hurry." He stuck out his hand. "Dean Ware," he said.

"Lawrence, Lawrence Pruitt." The two shook hands.

"You see the first pitch?" Dean asked.

"Nope. I got here for the last out in the bottom of the second. Been a couple of base runners. No score yet. Kid from Gulf Coast made a hell of a catch at third while ago."

"I see." Dean winced in the sun as he scanned the field. "Your boy out there playin' today?"

"Nope, my son's younger. You?"

"Naw, my boy's playin' his first season down in Niceville, at Okaloosa-Walton. We're from here, see, and TCC talked to him a few times. But he was ready to get out of this town." Dean fished a pair of sunglasses out of his shirt pocket. "Not much opportunity here in the shadow of Florida State. I don't want him in a program like that, get ignored for some big shot who jacks homeruns all day and averages 1.3 errors in a game. See, Okaloosa-Walton has a pretty good draft record. That one kid came outta there and pitched with the Braves. He's with the Marlins now, I think. What's that kid's name? Something goofy . . ."

"You mean Sponeybarger?" Lawrence asked.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s him. Poor kid having to go around with a name like that.” Dean chuckled to emphasize his amusement at the misfortune of that name and continued. “Yeah, my Brent’s a relief pitcher himself. Hell of a fastball.” He took a drink of what was left of his Coke before adding, “And a curve that drops off the table.”

Lawrence knew the type because it used to be him. He remembered his days at the little league park. Meredith had almost always volunteered to work the concession stand to avoid the embarrassment of sitting next to him during a game. Bill Evans had been umpiring one night and had called Kyle out on three strikes. Corey Erlanger was the pitcher, and he’d been getting away with a lot of stuff that night, including sliding into Kyle with his cleats up while he was covering home the inning before. Lawrence had snapped and he remembered forming the words without thought or difficulty. “I wouldn’t expect you to see a damn thing, Bill! You can’t even see that your wife’s a whore in about three counties!”

He had been ejected and banned from the park for the rest of that season. A week later, he was taking Kyle through the drive-thru at McDonald’s before dropping him off at the park. He remembered Kyle sitting there in full uniform, head turned away from him, looking out the window. “Dad, last week, you know, with the yelling thing, I was kind of embarrassed.” They were both silent and then Kyle continued. “What is a . . .” he hesitated, “a whore?”

That was the first time Lawrence had felt any regret about what he’d said, and the first time that he realized he was taking this whole baseball thing too seriously. He saw in Dean a man who might not have gone that far, but who constantly crossed the line as far as baseball fathers were concerned. Lawrence imagined Dean berating umpires, screaming at Brent for giving up a hit or missing a line drive back up the middle. He saw Dean stomping around, kicking up dirt, perhaps swearing. Dean had probably marched onto a field more than once and he was probably loathed by coaches, parents, and Brent’s teammates alike. Lawrence certainly knew the type.

Meanwhile, the centerfielder for TCC hit a solo homerun that sent the home fans into a roar of approval.

“Nice shot,” said Lawrence.

“Aw, that pitcher left it hanging, big and juicy. He practically handed him that homerun.” Dean rubbed his chin. “That’s one thing I can say for my Brent. If, *if* somebody’s gonna homer off of him, he makes ‘em *earn* it.”

“So, if Brent plays in Niceville, what are you doing at this game?” Lawrence felt strange using Brent’s name, as though he knew him.

“Well, we’re coming up here to play TCC next week, and I’m doing a little scouting for Coach Griffin.”

Lawrence doubted that Coach Griffin had requested the scouting, and he figured the scouting was for Brent’s benefit. He recognized the use of “we,” every father’s attempt to make himself a part of his son’s team.

“Oh,” Lawrence said. He drew in a deep breath of the sun-drenched April air. “You know, my son’s a pitcher too.” It felt strange offering an exchange, an entry into the no-man’s-land of the competitive pride of fathers, because he had abstained from it for so long.

“Yeah?” Dean’s interest was perked, as Lawrence knew it would be. “He a reliever?”

“Nope, he’s a starter.” Lawrence scooped a handful of sunflower seeds from the Ziploc. “And a southpaw.”

“A lefty, huh? If you can find a team that needs him, you’ll be in business. You know what they say about lefties.” Dean’s voice trailed off.

“No, I don’t,” Lawrence answered and spit a trinity of sunflower seed shells onto the bleacher at his feet.

“Well, lefties have control problems, tend to be a little wild. Has something to do with what side of the brain they use.”

Lawrence stared out at the 1-1 tie on the scoreboard. “Brent’s right-handed, huh?”

“Yup.” Dean didn’t skip a beat. “Got too much power to start, really. Kid puts so much into it that he wears himself down by the third or fourth inning. Now they’ve got him going between set-up man and closer. He’s got enough heat to seal the deal. He’s a bottom-of-the-ninth kind of kid. I think next year, he’ll be the permanent closer.”

“Kyle’s still young, but he knows that stamina can be just as important as throwing 95 miles per hour.”

“95?” Dean spat out the number like he didn’t believe it. “He clock that once at a clinic or something? How old is he?”

Dean was turned toward him, staring him full in the face with the black, insect-like circles of his sunglasses. Lawrence hesitated. “High school. Kyle’s in high school.” Lawrence considered how far he was willing to let this thing go, and he considered excusing himself to go to the bathroom.

“You got him working with somebody? These high school coaches do whatever it takes to win some district game. They don’t care about the arms they wear out to get there. *If* you got a kid throwing 95, you should find somebody that can really develop him.”

It was a compliment with the back of Dean’s hand. Nice advice, probably valid, but Lawrence didn’t like the *if*. It was the second time he’d said it that way in their conversation.

“When Brent was thirteen, we knew this baseball thing was serious. One of the high schools was recruiting him pretty hard . . .”

Lawrence interrupted. “A private school?”

“No, one of the public schools. The private schools aren’t always the best route if you want to be competitive in athletics. Some of them are too over-the-top with the test scores and the advanced classes and all that.”

“One of the *public* schools was recruiting?” Lawrence attempted the put the same tone on *public* as Dean had put on *if*.

It worked because Dean hesitated. “Well, yeah.”

“Which one?” Lawrence challenged.

“Well, public schools aren’t technically allowed to recruit, you know, but this was ‘under the table,’ if you know what I mean, so I’m not at liberty to mention specifics.” Dean had obviously regained the confidence of his footing in the conversation. “Let’s just say we made a move to another zone of the county after Brent finished eighth grade.”

The sun had climbed higher in the sky. It was now the top of the fifth, and the opposing team had runners on the corners with one out. The 1-1 tie was in real danger.

“Anyway,” Dean continued, “I found out about this guy up in Georgia. He’s originally from up north somewhere, but he played minor league ball in Georgia somewhere and just stayed down south after the baseball thing. Had to give the ole game

up because he couldn't get over problems with the rotator cuff. But, he takes pupils, see? But you have to drive 'em to him for a personal, individual tryout. Speed's not really what he's lookin' for, ya know?"

Lawrence noted the personal jab at Kyle's strength, what Dean perceived to be a threat to the superiority of his own Brent's ability.

"Each kid, and he'll tell anybody this up front, each kid has got to have that special something; this guy calls it the spark. And he'll tell you that if you need it defined, your kid probably hasn't got it. But we didn't run into that cause he saw Brent roll off about fifteen pitches, and he took him right then and there."

"How much does a thing like that cost?" Lawrence wanted to know.

"Well, \$800 a month. Plus gas for driving 174 miles there and back every weekend. But, he has a field, right in his backyard, and it's just him and his pupil out there for seven or eight hours, every Saturday for three months straight. That's called session one. He evaluates after that, and if you need a session two, he'll resign you for three more months. It's a two-part thing, see. He takes on a new pupil after that. Says you have to be conscious of time when developing skills because the big leagues certainly are."

"He has a point there," Lawrence said with sarcasm that never registered on Dean's radar. "Where at in Georgia are we talking about?"

Dean bucked at this question. Either his story was completely fabricated and he was being forced to defend a nonexistent validity, or he took Lawrence's curiosity as an interest in enrolling Kyle in the "two-part thing," something reserved for the regal talents of right-handed relievers like his son.

"Well, see, it was some little ass-backwards little country place. Not even a dot on the map. Something like Monkey's Eyebrow or Dog Horn or something like that." Dean twisted, contorted, and crinkled his face as he searched his mind. "Gee, that's been four or five years ago, and my wife Melinda drove it most of the time, so I'd be lying if I told you I remembered exactly."

Lawrence was on the verge of addressing how Kyle had been named all-star at a very selective summer clinic in south Florida. And he was on the verge of asking why Brent Ware, if he had this spark, wasn't playing at a big time division I baseball school like Florida State. Why not aim higher for a talent that has been privately developed in

Monkey's Eyebrow, Georgia? And he was about to ask about Brent Ware's record of saves because no matter what it was, he could eclipse that with Kyle's lifetime record as a starting pitcher: twenty-six wins, four losses, three no decisions. But there was an interruption.

A young girl climbed up to a seat on the bleacher below them, just to the right of Dean. She looked like she couldn't have been older than 21, and even in the still, crouching heat, he could smell her perfume, like lilacs. He wondered why she was showing up now after five innings had already gone by.

When Lawrence didn't respond, Dean turned to follow his gaze. "Well, would you look at that. Nice scenery, huh?" The girl didn't seem to notice as Dean looked her up and down, soaked her in. But Lawrence couldn't blame Dean; he was transfixed as well. She was beautiful, and the sudden striking of the thought that she might be an angel caught him off guard.

Dean took it a step further. He made a move that, had you not ever talked to him, you would interpret as fatherly. He picked up an abandoned program behind him. "Excuse me miss, is this yours by any chance?"

The girl turned at his voice, confused for a moment. She assessed the program in his hand and then smiled at the both of them. "No, it's not mine. I just got here." Her hair was long and straight and yellow like the heat that was all around them.

Lawrence found himself picking up the conversation where she left off. "You missed some good innings of baseball, a homerun even." He hadn't expected to talk, and he blushed, hoping he could pass it off as a consequence of the heat.

"Yeah," added Dean, "and one heck of a catch by the third baseman from Gulf Coast."

Dean hadn't even been present for that, and Lawrence noted that this had somehow become territorial.

"I was working," the girl said quite simply, nodding slightly in some gesture of affirmation.

"What line of work are you in?" asked Dean.

"Shoes," she said. "I work in a shoe store out on Thomasville Road."

“Say, it’s awfully bright out here. You don’t want to be squinting the entire game. Didn’t you bring any sunglasses?” Dean arched up his eyebrows so that they showed above the dark lenses over his eyes.

“Oh, no, I’m fine,” she answered. She shifted her weight.

“You’re welcome to borrow mine if you’d like.” Dean smiled.

Creepy old man, thought Lawrence. That really was too much, and he could tell by her face that she thought so. “How about some sunflower seeds?” Lawrence held up the limp, crinkled Ziploc bag in her direction. There were only a couple of handfuls of the dark seeds left.

She looked confused and then alarmed, but neither registered with Dean.

“Say listen, I was fixin’ to go down to the concessions and buy myself another Coke and maybe some peanuts. Could I get you anything? My treat of course.” Before she could accept or reject the offer, he was up and weaving through feet and legs to get the end of the row, saying, “I bet you’d like some popcorn, some bubble gum. I’ll be right back.”

By that time, the girl had turned back to the game. She looked relieved to have Dean, the closer of her two over-eager conversationalists, out of the picture even if it was only temporary.

“I’m sorry about him,” said Lawrence.

She didn’t flinch.

He tried again, a little louder this time and leaning in her direction. “M’am, I’m sorry about him.”

She jerked around. “What?”

When she said it, she sounded very young and annoyed. And she wasn’t an angel, just a pretty young girl trying to enjoy a nice afternoon in April. Lawrence swept the last of his sunflower seed shells to the ground with his foot, and crumbled the Ziploc bag in his fist. As the seventh inning began, he pulled his keys from his jeans pocket and made his way to the parking lot.

Four and a half innings, he thought as he walked back to the car. That was longer than he usually managed to stay. Scorched blades of grass crackled under his heavy step.

He found his old Civic, unlocked the door and slumped down behind the wheel. The day had made him tired. That whole business with Dean had been exhausting. He

leaned across, opened the glove compartment, and retrieved the owner's manual to his car. He ran his thumb across the edges of the tissue-thin pages until he felt the marked division, and he opened to that spot.

A school portrait, a small rectangle with a slender trim of white where his wife had cut it from a page of prints. Kyle didn't look fifteen with his gelled hair and slight, adolescent pout.

The corners of Lawrence's mouth turned upward, just for a second, and then the full, dull pain of missing someone struck him full force. It had been six years since the car accident, and this still happened, but not all that frequently anymore. At least he wasn't playing the what-if route anymore, analyzing how things would be different if he had made Kyle stay home and study that night. And he never, ever cried.

But then he attached himself to the records, the parks, the trips, the tournaments. Twenty-six wins, four losses, and three no decisions. That was, of course, counting all of his outings from youth leagues before high school.

He pictured Brent Ware, a younger version of his father, strutting around the mound and toeing at the dirt like an angry bull. He laughed a little and closed his owner's manual and put it back where it belonged. For four and a half innings, his son had been as alive as Brent Ware, maybe more, and even though he was tiring, Lawrence had Dean to thank for that.

He opened a crumbled copy of *The Tallahassee Democrat* from where it rested on the passenger seat and thumbed to the sports section. The dark shading of the photographs had absorbed the heat of the day, and the pages of print were warm against his fingertips. There was a game at one of the high schools across town in a couple of days and FSU was at home for the upcoming weekend. He figured he'd visit these games, stay for as many innings as he could.

SAFE

The Lincoln Parkway in central Kentucky is plain and straight and beautiful at night. With the windows cracked, the July air smells like a mix of Vidalia onions and cinnamon. Maggie Woods and her father, Willard, are on their way to Elizabethtown to pick up Gregory M. Garner, age 47; he has died of a heart attack.

Willard Woods is a mortician and funeral director at the Parker and Ramsey Funeral Home in Campbellsville, Kentucky. He is huge and round, a Santa Claus with a brown moustache instead of a white beard and a comb-over that he maintains with a generic brand of mousse. At 3:13 A.M., he drives the Chrysler minivan that is custom-built for death calls through the heart of the Bluegrass State; there is nothing behind the front two seats except metal racks along each side that hold hospital cots in place.

Willard tells his fourteen-year old daughter about his hero, Mickey Mantle.

“Did you know Mick had the first homerun that was ever measured?”

Maggie yawns. “What, like the distance?”

“Yeah. It was 1953. Against the Senators. Went 565 feet.”

“Mantle was hot. If I could go back in history and date anybody, it’d be Mantle.”

Willard chuckles, but on the inside, he has a brief wave of panic. Who said anything about dating? Baseball is supposed to be a safe zone. Everything these days is a conversational land mine with Maggie. And besides, date Mantle? Sure he was an icon, the best switch hitter in the history of baseball, three MVP awards, the Triple Crown in ‘56, yaddah yaddah yaddah, but it’s no secret nowadays that he had been “on the wild side,” a womanizer. And that’s what Maggie wants? A wild man who’s “hot”? How are human beings hot? Everybody’s supposed to be the healthy ole 98.6 degrees...He grapples for something else to think about. His mind lands on his job; this is the third middle-of-the-night, out-of-town death call this week.

“Dad? Hello; anybody home?” Maggie asks because silence is unacceptable to

her adolescent attention span on a dark stretch of highway in the middle of the night.

“Yeah? Huh? Yeah. What? I’m here.” Willard blinks his eyes repeatedly, rapidly, involuntary.

“You’re quiet; what are you thinking about?”

Willard hesitates for a second. “Embalming school and how long ago it was.” Willard contributes an answer for the sake of conversation, but his mind is still wandering, floating a million miles away from this blue minivan.

Maggie is fascinated now and sits straighter in the cushy passenger seat. She likes the reaction she gets when she tells people her father is a mortician. She likes the mystery it attaches to her otherwise completely ordinary, mundane, small town existence. “What about it?”

“Well, we had this class.”

“What class? Don’t skimp on the details, Dad.”

“It was called Restorative Art, and we had this mold of a human head. It had the right shape but no features. Looked like Plaster of Paris. Our assignment was to take a picture of somebody we knew and rebuild their facial features based on that picture.”

“You could pick anybody?”

“Yeah because the whole idea is that if someone’s in a bad accident and you have to rebuild their facial structure, you’re going to have to do it based on a picture.”

Maggie takes some time to let this soak in. It was a very heavy idea to pack around in one’s mind.

“Can you guess who I picked to rebuild?”

Maggie’s hazel eyes squint slightly as she fishes for a guess. “Mom?” She tucks a stray brown curl behind her ear, an awkward action to detract attention from herself even though her father is watching the pale glow of headlights on the empty highway lined with the occasional abandoned barn or a pond so still that it looks like spilt oil in the dark night. She is not comfortable with her frizzy brown hair and muscular, blossoming body. She’s taller and larger than all of her friends. Her mother says she’s “bigger boned.” She’s part clown and part peacemaker in that strange tug-of-war that is adolescent friendship among girls. She likes neither.

“I didn’t know your mother then. And if I had, I wouldn’t want to be rebuilding her face in embalming school, as if she’d been in an accident. Pretty morbid, don’t you

think?”

“You’re a mortician; morbid doesn’t apply here.”

“Morbid always applies.” This is a condition of existence that has become automatic to Willard in his twenty-one years in the funeral business. “I’ll give you a hint.”

“No hints, Dad; I can get this,” Maggie demands.

“We were just talking about him.”

“Dad! I said no hints.” Maggie’s exasperation is mild and passes through her mind like quicksilver. She considers Willard’s hint. “Mickey Mantle?”

“Yup. I rebuilt The Mick’s face.” Willard remembered proudly how careful he’d been, how it really had looked like his hero. “We had to use modeling clay and then shade it with these special paints.”

Maggie considers using modeling clay to rebuild the faces of her favorite people. She thinks of the square jaw line of Bobby Fryer, the half-god, half-eleventh grader who passes by her locker every day on his way to geometry after third period. She imagines using the edge of her thumb to make the curvature of her mother’s full top lip. She pictures pressing clumps of clay together to craft her father’s oversize nose. “Well, wasn’t it depressing to think about reassembling your hero’s face? Wasn’t *that* morbid?”

“No. Not at all actually. Somehow it made the assignment more . . . human . . . more bearable.”

“Weird, dad. Really truly weird.” She says this with the corners of her mouth slightly raised, and Willard knows that weird is an expression of admiration here.

“Maggie?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t tell your mother that I took you on a death call when she gets back from convention, okay?”

“Why?” Maggie knew the answer but wanted to hear her father’s version of it.

“She’ll get . . . weirded out about it, and I don’t feel like taking the blame.”

“Sure. I won’t say anything.” There is another strange tug-of-war relationship in her life, the one between her parents. Two equal forces vying for her attention, pulling her taut. Her father is usually the one to back down, relinquish some territory. It takes so little to make her mother angry or sad or both. “But you could always tell her it was my

idea.”

“I’m supposed to be the responsible parent,” says Willard.

“Oh yeah, right.” Maggie grins. “What do people do at floral conventions anyway?”

“I don’t know. But I do know one thing; I don’t worry about your mother because I bet there’s not a straight man within a mile of that convention.”

Maggie snorts an unexpected laugh at her father’s line of logic and looks out at a grove of black trees whizzing by against the bruise colored sky.

They pull up to some rear entrance at the Hardin Memorial Hospital.

“Do you want to stay in the van or you comin’ in?” Willard doesn’t want to force his daughter to see anything she doesn’t want to. Even though her presence on this macabre trip is her idea, he isn’t sure just how curious she really is.

“I’ll come and wait inside.”

There are some maroon waiting chairs on each side of the hall, and Maggie takes a seat while Willard goes to sign the paperwork at the morgue. The lights seem surreal after being in the dark night. The lights are not as bright as they could be, Maggie thinks, to create a sense of calm for the people that have to be in this hospital where bad things and sad things are potentially happening to them. Nobody else is in the waiting area, and she wonders where the Garner family is grieving. She wonders if they’re in some other carpeted corner of this hospital, sitting in uncomfortable chairs and watching reruns on Nick-At-Nite or some strange B horror movie on USA. The latter, she thinks, would be more entertaining, but almost immediately she scolds herself for the inappropriate idea of a grieving family watching some mutant creature devour the human race. Her cheeks flush with embarrassment, even though there is no way for anyone to know that this insensitive thought has ever existed.

Her eyes roam across this little section of Hardin Memorial, trying to find some object to divert her attention, get her out of her own head. But there’s only the light on the walls, which paints them the color of creamcicles, and Maggie tries to think how long it’s been since she’s had one of the beloved childhood treats.

Willard returns. His khakis are wrinkled, and there are dark bags under his eyes.

“Here’s the keys. I’ll meet you at the van.”

Maggie waits in the passenger seat with the doors locked. A tap on the window startles her, makes her physically leap from her seat.

“Unlock the doors.” Her father’s voice is thick and muffled through the glass of the window. She does as she’s told.

The back doors of the Chrysler open, and a huge mound, draped in a white sheet, looks dangerously balanced on a comparatively small stretcher. Gregory M. Garner is massive, she thinks. With the folds of lifeless flesh spilling over each side of the stretcher, there is no way to pull out the metal racks and lock this stretcher in place. There are two orderlies helping her father load this man, and they are an awkward trinity, climbing in the van, crouching, grunting, giving quick commands in brief, strained tones. She sort of wishes she hadn’t come along for this, hadn’t wanted to see this. But only sort of.

Once the body is in the van, one of the orderlies climbs into the van with her father. “We’ve got these cords. You’ll have to tie him down to keep him from shiftin’ on the drive back.” As the orderly begins the task of weaving an intricate tangle from these stretchy cords, looping them through and around the body to hold it in place, he looks to the front of the van for the first time. “Who you got with you?” His question comes out in an awkward voice because he hadn’t expected to find anyone there, certainly not a fourteen year old girl.

Willard remembers Maggie for the first time since asking her to unlock the doors. “This is my daughter, Maggie.” The orderly seems unsure of what to do or say so he just returns to the task at hand until it is finished.

Neither father nor daughter speaks until they are out of the parking lot.

Maggie offers the first comment. “This guy is huge.”

“507 pounds.”

Maggie’s mind snaps back to their earlier conversation. “507. That’d be a homerun in Yankee Stadium, huh?”

Willard is flooded with an awkward moment of intense pride and tenderness toward his daughter. “It sure would.” Willard wants something else to offer at this point, but Maggie is the first to speak again. “Dad, how old were you when you got your first girlfriend?”

Willard feels as if his heart is rising to an unnatural position in his chest. He struggles not to draw attention to himself while taking a deep breath. “You hungry?”

“Don’t change the subject.” Maggie, unaware of the repetitious movement of her hand, is opening and shutting the air conditioning vent on her side of the dash.

Willard’s four years of high school were spent on the football and baseball fields. He hadn’t held a girl’s hand until he was a sophomore at Campbellsville College. Her name was Linda, and he remembered thinking what an unpredictable creature she had been. Creature. He’d always thought of her more as a creature than human, something wholly different than himself. He’d worked up the courage to kiss her after three months of talking and holding her dry, birdlike hand in his large, awkward, sweaty one. Her lipstick had left an unpleasant, waxy aftertaste on his mouth. Despite that, the way she set her hair made her look like an angel with golden cloud dust constantly floating around her head, and she always managed to make the normally innocent smell of baby powder seem exotic and enticing.

But those aren’t things you tell your only daughter. Besides, if he did tell her, she’d want to know what ever happened between them, and he’d have to explain how he accidentally left her at the ballpark after a game once because he had been so upset with himself for getting the final strikeout. He’d sped off into the April twilight, his tires throwing little gray flecks of gravel as he left the parking lot. Linda had honestly been the farthest thing from his mind.

Bradley Garrison, better known as Scoot, had been all too pleased with himself and his double in the fifth inning, and he volunteered to give Linda a ride home. They had taken an out-of-the-way detour to Big John’s, a bootlegger right out past the county line. One thing led to another, and they ended up eloping to Clarksville, Indiana, where Scoot was from. At the time, Willard had felt more surprised than anything. He wasn’t ready for marriage in the least, and Scoot had left behind a baseball scholarship that had been divvied up between the rest of the starting line-up (including Willard) for the remainder of the semester. The guy who had replaced Scoot out in left field (what was

his name?) got the game-winning double in the conference championship that year. Really, everything had worked out for the best. But after all these years, more than at the time, the story leaves a heavy feeling in Willard's chest. He has no idea why; this bothers him.

These events of his past have passed through Willard's mind in Technicolor brightness and a matter of seconds. If he doesn't speak soon, Maggie will demand an answer, probe him for pieces of his past to add to her collection of novelties. She can be so much like her mother, he thinks, and he worries that he is more of a novelty to her than a father. But in the distance, the orange glow of a potential diversion, a possible savior, interrupts the cobalt sky at 4:43 A.M. A truck stop and all night diner sits like a mirage in the distance, on the outskirts of Elizabethtown.

"You hungry?" Willard asks.

"Don't change the subject," is Maggie's reply.

"There's a 24 hour Jerry's up here on the right. How 'bout a hot fudge cake? You used to love them when you were a little girl."

"Is hot fudge cake on your diet?"

Willard smiles at how much Maggie really is like his wife. "No, but we're racking up things not to tell your mother. Why stop now?"

Maggie glances over her shoulder, only half expecting to see a dead man. "Will Mr. Garner be ok?"

"I don't think much would phase him at this point. He's covered; no one's gonna bother him. Besides, we're getting a quick snack and getting back on the road."

Inside the Jerry's, a very tired, grumpy hostess in a brown smock seats them. Her nametag says Becky Jo, and Maggie is thankful that she has escaped the phenomenon of the double first name for Southern females.

They sit in a booth. The table looks clean but is sticky, Maggie imagines, from an invisible layer of a spilled Coke that has dried. They order hot fudge cakes, and Willard keeps readjusting his weight on the puffy vinyl seat of the booth. Three construction workers on stools at the bar watch ESPN from a TV mounted on the wall, and Willard remembers his pride at Maggie's earlier gauging of the dimensions of Yankee Stadium.

“Well baby girl, I think the Braves might actually go all the way and win the World Series this year. Glavine and Smoltz look awfully good on the mound.”

“I don’t think they look that good. They look...kinda old. Bobby Fryer on the other hand knows how to wear a baseball uniform.”

Willard chokes on the sip of coffee he’s just taken; he coughs and sputters like a car engine that doesn’t want to start or is about to die. His cheeks are hot with panic. He wonders if this Bobby is Dave Fryer’s boy. If so, he has probably inherited his father’s wild, bad boy genes. He wonders if this Bobby talks to his Maggie. He searches his memory for a male voice that might have called the house and asked for her. He can’t recall any. Baseball, he thinks, is like home plate for this conversation; if he can get back to it in time, he’ll be safe.

“Oh, be serious,” Willard demands of his daughter. “Do you know what Glavine’s ERA is right now?”

Maggie feels as if her heart has dropped several centimeters in her chest. Her elation at the thought of Bobby Fryer has passed quickly through her fourteen-year old consciousness, no different from anything else. Everything is so temporary, so shifting. She hates it. Maggie appraises the faces of the people who eat at Jerry’s in the very early morning and racks her brain for the correct statistic to answer her father’s question. She wants to shine for him, make him proud. Such a tiny fragment of their lives has been spent with just the other one present.

And then she reaches a calm moment of clarity: she will not find the correct number to satisfy her father’s statistical request. This is just like dealing with her girlfriends; she must find another outlet. It is her turn to change the subject, to put the pressure of finding an answer back on her father.

“I know how Mom decided she just wanted to have one kid because of how it was for her growing up. You know, with her mom playing favorites and her dad never paying much attention to the girls and all.”

Willard is confused; what happened to Glavine’s ERA? He has no idea where this is going, but he nods his recognition of truth to what Maggie is saying.

“Well, do you ever wish that you guys’d had a son so you’d have more in common with him? You know, so you could talk baseball with him and watch him play and stuff?” She has asked her mother a version of this question before, but not her

father. He's the only one who can really answer. Maggie watches Willard's face; being fourteen has taught her that sometimes your face tells people things you don't want to tell them with words.

"I'm talking baseball with you, aren't I?"

"You know what I mean." Maggie is determined not to let him slip out of this question she has put before him.

Willard senses her determination. He has waited for moments like these, without the threat of his wife stepping in as the most valuable parent. He has wanted to share a meaningful moment with Maggie, has wanted this chance to bond (or so he thinks), but it feels like torture. Everything suddenly feels surreal, and this person sitting across the table from him feels oddly detached from him and his existence. A creature, he thinks, something wholly different than himself. "Maggie, I'm gonna tell you something. Like most of what's happened tonight, I'm gonna ask you not to tell your mother."

Maggie grins her assent to their pact. Sharing secrets with her father is new territory. As Willard leans toward her, the diner's bright, orangey light catches the sheen of her lip gloss and dances there in the calm moments before Willard speaks. Her top lip, he thinks, is full and perfect, like her mother's. He is glad she never inherited his nose, too large among the rest of his features. He has to shift his gaze, just slightly, before continuing. He focuses on an iridescent ring on the table, an outline left from a sticky glass of soda.

"I doubt your mother has ever told you because we decided not to." He stops to take a deep breath before he continues. "Your mother and I were pregnant with another child before we had you."

Maggie blinks, an involuntary reaction of some pair of muscles. The pink beds of her fingernails are white from gripping the edge of the table.

"It was a little boy. We were going to name him Michael. I wanted to call him Mickey for Mickey Mantle, but your mother said we weren't nicknaming our son after America's most popular rodent. You know, like Mickey Mouse."

Maggie's mouth waters with hot saliva, the precursor to vomiting.

"We figured we'd pick a middle name when he was born." It is weird for Willard to talk about his son after so many years with someone other than himself, with someone that is alive. "But, there was a problem, something with the umbilical cord, and he was

stillborn.”

The hot fudge cakes arrive via a very perky waitress wearing way too much Aquanet and fuchsia lipstick. This breaks Maggie’s spell of astonishment.

“Why didn’t anybody ever tell me? Oh hey, Maggie, by the way, you’ve got a dead brother. No biggie.” She stops to push the brown fuzz of her bangs out of her eyes. “I’ve never even been to the grave. I’ve never even heard anything about this. NOTHING!”

The trio of construction workers at the bar looks up from mugs of coffee. Willard stares at the melting vanilla mound on top of his fudge cake. For some reason, it reminds him of Mr. Garner under the white sheet.

“If Michael had lived, would I even be here?” Maggie asks in a voice muscled by anger.

Willard hadn’t thought about the possibility of this question being asked. He and his wife had always agreed that they wanted one child to give their undivided attention to; they wanted to give their child everything they never had. And they’d always told Maggie that part of it, making sure she knew how special she was. He cannot answer her now. He cannot look at her. His eyes find ESPN on the wall, and he knows he has botched this bonding experience. This type of thing is so rare between him and his daughter. The thought of hot fudge cake seems ridiculous.

Maggie pushes herself from the table, the tears already hot trails down her cheeks like the ones left behind by snails on concrete porches and sidewalks. She plans to head for the Chrysler, but there are two problems. First, it is locked, and her father has the keys. Second, 507 pounds of Gregory M. Garner are tied down in the back. She heads to the women’s restroom to be alone.

Fifteen minutes have passed, and the hot fudge cakes have melted into a brownish blob, something altogether different from what they were intended to look like. The perky waitress comes back to check on her table and is dismayed at the untouched deserts.

“Somethin’ wrong with the cakes, sir?” Her voice is way too loud and happy for this hour of the morning.

“No, no, they’re fine.” Willard looks up. “Look, could you do me a favor?”

This waitress, Gwynette according to her nametag, looks skeptical. There is no telling what sorts of requests have followed that question during her employment here at Jerry’s.

Willard is too upset to note this skepticism and continues. “My daughter has gone to the ladies’ room and is very upset with me. I would be really grateful if you could maybe go in for me and apologize and ask her to at least come out and talk to me.”

Maggie hears the bathroom door open and swing shut. The skin of her face feels tight from dried tears. She sits straighter on the toilet, a reflex.

“Maggie?” An unfamiliar, loud female voice calls her name.

“Who is that?” she asks from behind the thick stall door.

“Honey, I’m Gwynette, your waitress. There’s a awfully sad man out here in one of my booths, says he’s your daddy. He asked me to come tell you that he’s real sorry and he wants you to at least come out and talk to him.”

Maggie considers her options for a second. She is exhausted. She can’t sit in the E-town Jerry’s ladies’ restroom forever. She doesn’t have to talk to him. It’s just 45 minutes until they’re home.

The Lincoln Parkway is still pretty in its simplicity as dawn approaches. The horizon has lightened to lavender, and the trees aren’t as black now, the edges of their outlines growing sharper. They’ve been riding in silence for twenty-four minutes. They are getting close to a tiny little place called Buffalo. He takes a left off Highway 210 next to a small Baptist church with an open basketball court in the back. There’s no traffic on the road, but he still gives a signal before turning.

A few minutes later, they pass a general store and Willard feels as if he’s driving into his past. If Maggie has noticed the detour, she hasn’t given any indication. He can’t see her face; she’s probably watching for deer, he thinks. He hopes it’s all still there, the huge maple tree on the third-base side, the concession stand made of cement blocks painted dark green, just like the dugouts. Even though he has played church softball

there countless times, he wonders if maybe his memory has betrayed him. If this field is gone, his heart might break.

Before he realizes it, he is speaking. “In my line of work, if you don’t believe that there’s some kind of reason for what’s happening, you’ll go crazy. You’ll hate the world and your life and go crazy.”

Maggie is silent; she’s watching for deer out the passenger side window.

Willard figures silence is the best response he could have hoped for at this point and continues. “What you asked me earlier? The answer is yes. Yes, you would have existed because you were meant to exist. You probably don’t believe me, but I swear I wouldn’t trade you for anybody.” A few seconds pass before he adds, “Not even Mantle himself.”

Maggie is tired. And she wants to believe her father. And there’s just enough desperation in his voice to make her give in to that want. She doesn’t know why, but the tears start to brim in her eyes. She doesn’t want to cry again. She blinks them back. She searches for something else to talk about, something light, something safe.

“Dad, why do you like baseball so much?”

That sentence is his saving grace, his second chance to salvage what’s left of their rare excursion by themselves. It’s the second unexpected potential savior that has come to him tonight. He must not screw this up.

“Well, it keeps on goin’ and that keeps me goin’.”

“What do you mean?” Maggie’s voice sounds too old and tired to be coming from someone who’s only been here for fourteen years.

“I mean year in and year out, it keeps goin’. It sleeps in the winter, but you know that it’s gonna wake up again in the spring and be just as good, sometimes better, than the year before.”

Maggie chews her bottom lip. This is what she does when she thinks hard about something.

“And, it’s a lot like the visitations I work at the funeral home. I mean, people stand around and tell stories about whoever they’ve lost. And they’re good stories. Stuff that you want to remember about a person. Things they’ve done and said that made you proud of them, made you love them. People are sad, especially at the funeral, but usually at the visitations, they’re retelling the good stuff, getting it fixed in their memories and

sharing it with other people.”

“What’s that got to do with baseball?”

“Well, you know how we were talking about The Mick on the way here?”

Maggie nods.

“Well, he’s got cancer pretty bad, and he won’t be around much longer. It’s sad, but it’s true.” There is a steady, painful pressure behind his eyes as he holds back tears. “What’s not sad is that in fifty, eighty, a hundred years, people will still talk about him. People will remember things he has said, the awards he won, how he was a switch hitter. They’ll remember the number seven in the middle of his back because no other Yankee is ever going to wear it. All kinds of stuff, big and small. They keep him alive in a way. And fans are always gonna do that. It gives me...hope, I guess.”

Willard stops to catch his breath and his thoughts. “A switch hitter. The Mick was magnificent from both sides of the plate. You face a new pitcher, you gotta make adjustments. So he can’t get the best of you. Death’s like that. You gotta adjust after someone you love is gone. If you can’t, you might as well leave the game too.”

They are here: a little unnamed ball field in Buffalo, Kentucky. Dusty, gray rocks crackle against one another under the weight of the Chrysler and its three passengers. Willard surveys this place, familiar but not after all these years. It looks almost the same with its weather-stained wooden bleachers and gravel parking lot.

“Where are we?” Maggie asks.

“This is an old softball field where we used to come play church ball.”

Willard gets out of the van and Maggie follows. He’s taking deep breaths, almost gulping the summer air, and he feels like everything is perfect, like his whole life might have been leading up to standing at an old softball field just before dawn with his teenage daughter. The fact that this diamond-shaped plot of land has survived the years, absorbed all the games ever played on it and crystallized them in its red clay dirt and kelly green outfield comforts Willard more than anything has in years.

It shows its age though. There are still a few hand-painted wooden advertisement panels along the outfield fence; their paint is faded and peeling almost beyond recognition. And the gaps of chain link fence that aren’t covered by plywood are tangled with thick, curling honeysuckle vines. The maple still towers over the third-base line, and the two wooden seesaws (Willard had forgotten them until now) are jutting into the

early morning at odd angles.

“I doubt you remember it,” he tells his daughter, “but you’ve been here before.”

“Really?”

“Yup. Those seesaws right there? Some little kid decided he was tired of seesawin’ with you, and he got off while you were up in the air. It knocked the breath out of you when you hit the ground. You’re mother was furious.”

Maggie smiles in the dark, but Willard can’t see it. It is a smile that isn’t happy but rather satisfied. Everything seems so serious. The past and everything that comes with it. Growing up. Death. Her instincts tell her it’s her turn, her obligation to speak. She senses that something has shifted; something has switched. She looks out at the field and feels herself moving to the other side of the plate in this conversation. It’s a nice freedom, she thinks, to be able to move from this side to that. She thinks she understands the power that Mantle must have felt. “Dad, tell me when you knew that The Mick was your favorite player. When was the first time you ever saw him play?”

Willard knows that the trip has been salvaged. He digs in his memory for the first time he ever saw Mickey Mantle swing a bat. He wants to get all the details just right.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jennifer D. Wolford was born March 29, 1981 in Campbellsville, Kentucky. She graduated Summa Cum Laude from Eastern Kentucky University in 2003 with a BA in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing. She received her Master of Arts in Creative Writing from Florida State in 2005. Her short story “Safe,” appearing in this collection, was published in *Spitball*.