

## A Slow Grounder

I yelled at him from across the field.

Just after the ball took a short hop.

I yelled from behind the fence, my fingers, like talons, curling around the metal.

The ball bounced “funny” someone said, off the weeded infield over the tip of his glove and slowed in the deep grass.

“What happened?” I screamed, so loud my eyes hurt.

He didn’t get in front of the ball, a slow grounder, like he should.

My face burned as soon as the words left my mouth. It was all emotion. The other parents sitting behind me stared, I could feel their disapproval.

His face got red too. It reminded me of when he’d come in from a day of playing in the snow, the red rough bumps over his eight year-old cheeks.

It was my glove in his hand. The Rawlings with my childhood address penned in green. I remember buying it with my dad. It’s the only time I remember him buying me anything, he wasn’t a spender.

Maybe the glove was too big for him.

I saw the water expand, his eyes now distorted-looking behind the burgeoning tears.

I sat back down on the bench with the rest of the parents. They no longer cared about their kids as the next ball had been hit, and the next and the next. All they wanted to see was how I would act. I had no plan except to be invisible. He didn’t listen.

My son put his hands on his knees, the proper stance for his position, maybe he wouldn’t make the same mistake again. But later I knew he was trying to hold himself up, carrying not just the weight of his mistake, but mine too.

I drove home alone.

He rode with his friends.

We did not speak of it that night. I thought it was past us, but I began to feel the burden of the silence.

Late that night I lay in bed well past when I would usually doze off. The image of his face kept me awake, not the snoring of my wife. He looked so small out there on the big field. So alone. With nowhere to hide. No one to run to. But that’s what he must have felt like doing. Running. As far as he could, away from the embarrassment. He was too young to understand it wasn’t him, but me that should be running.

I climbed out of bed quietly, the house was dark and chilly. I turned on the hallway light and looked in the room at the sleeping child, a big stuffed purple Barney tucked securely under his arm.

The light caught his face, the red had faded from his fair skin. I could see the cowlick in front that had been pushed down by his baseball cap, now sprung back to life from his evening bath. He looked so small in that "big boy bed."

I collapsed to my knees and held on to his little feet that propped up the blanket halfway down the mattress. I squeezed them, hoping to communicate somehow what I was feeling. The complete failure of the moment and what he will recall about it. I could not contain the tears, the ones he held back earlier that day, fell like rain from my eyes. I tried to keep in the heaves of my breath as not to disturb his sleep.

I want to tell him I am sorry. I failed him. I couldn't help it, but of course I could. I look back up at his face, it's not moving, his sleep continued. We never spoke of it.

He's leaving for college in a few weeks, his face no longer smooth, but rough to the kiss. He's more restless now at night. When I sneak in he stirs and asks what's wrong.

"Nothing," I tell him. He won't understand.

But tonight he is not stirring. A twitch every now and then lets me know the depths of his sleep.

"I'm sorry," I tell him in the quiet of the night. "I was a younger parent then."

He will be gone soon, the teaching is over. I don't know what he'll remember from his days in our house. I only know the things I hope he forgets.