Home field advantage

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Home field advantage

by

Jennifer Amy Maddox

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:
Stephen Pett, Major Professor
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Retirement

I ache. My biceps, my quads, gluts, hamstrings, and groin. I shuffle across the carpet of my old bedroom to the bathroom. I can feel the strain and stretch of my thigh muscles working hard for every step. I attempt to sit, and find that I am ninety years old. I see why my great grandmother was happy to have a large, silver handrail installed in her bathroom. I understand why handicapped bathroom stalls have very tall toilets. My legs cannot support the slow squatting motion required for sitting. The muscles twitch as my rubber legs begin to wobble. Bracing myself with one hand on the edge of the bowl, I drop all of my weight down hard onto the toilet’s plastic seat. I relax, but only for a moment.

Soon, I will have to try to get back up.

Yesterday I played fast-pitch softball for the first time after a season hiatus. There is such a thing as being in shape, and then there’s being in game shape. I am in neither. I’m still officially on the team roster, but the season was almost over and I hadn’t had an opportunity to play while away at school in Iowa. When I found out they were
competing in a weekend tournament in Wisconsin and were short on catchers, I jumped at the chance.

For the first game I was a sub, and did not play. I jogged through the grass to the outfield fence and back with my team, I warmed up the game’s starting pitcher, and then I sat down by myself on the long metal bench in the shade of the plastic blue tarps that we had strung up and pulled taut over the top of the fence as a makeshift dugout roof. But I couldn’t sit still. I stood and clapped and encouraged, “You got this one, Anna. Pitch it right in there now!”

I paced to the other end of the dugout. “One down. You got it now. Tough D ladies, tough D!”

I paced back. “Lookin good, Anna. Lookin good.” I felt like a cheerleader, and I liked it. I was excited for them to get a quick three outs and then join me in the dugout. For the first time, I didn’t mind that I wasn’t in the game. What mattered was that I was sitting in the dugout and not in the bleachers. I was part of this team.

After the game I sat in a patch of shade under a young tree planted along the first baseline and watched my team trickle over with lunch bags and coolers. The girls took off cleats, visited the port-a-potty, and sat in a large oval. I offered to grab my teammates Gatorade from the large cooler I had helped pack that morning as we talked about school, who was dating or marrying whom, and what had happened to prior
players. As we dug in our coolers, sharing sandwiches, crackers, grapes, I realized that this had always been my favorite part.

I caught the second game, and my body was not prepared for it. Claire, the starting pitcher of the game, didn’t finish the first inning. She pitched to six batters before coach pulled her, and only threw two strikes. I spent the inning diving, blocking, and chasing the other twenty-two wild pitches to the backstop in full gear on a humid day as the opponents stole base after base. This was catching like I had never experienced. I tried to stay positive and help my pitcher work through it, but my labored motions betrayed my true thoughts.

As the game came to a close, low clouds turned the sky a greenish shade of grey. Rain poured, drenching the players and turning the fields to mud. The last game of the day had to be pushed to eight o’clock this morning, and I certainly didn’t mind. My muscles were already beginning to stiffen and ache.

I rode back to my parents’ with my feet up on the dashboard, elevating my legs as I had in the past after entire weekends of catching, to relieve my cramping calves. I spent the night at my parents’, planning to make the drive back to Iowa later today. I will have driven a total of eighteen hours to play one game of softball.

I feel like I came out of retirement for one last hurrah, and instead proved that I am past my prime. What is it about me that refuses to quit? I hobble around the house,
avoiding the stairs at all costs, and question if it was worth it. I sit down in a wooden kitchen chair with my lower body perfectly still, fearing pain. Why did I do this to myself?
Home

I come from a modest one-story ranch-style house in Romeoville, Illinois. A house in a better neighborhood with better schools that my parents worked hard to afford for the sake of their children. I come from a home with two large cracks snaking their way down the wall from the peak of the vaulted ceiling in the living room, telling the story of the refinery explosion that happened a few miles away when I was four years old. A place where dropping off my sisters at elementary school and then heading to Venture for double-coupon day with Mom was exciting, but not necessarily better than going home to watch another episode of Sesame Street while she did our laundry and cleaned the house.

I come from a place where our mother let us have our way—a bedroom with pastel pink walls and magenta carpeting. A room across the hall from my little brother’s, where the two of us played Ninja Turtles or G.I. Joes for hours, but only after I proved that I knew the names of all the plastic men.

I come from a corner where my sister and I created roller skating routines on the steep driveway of the detached garage, performing our arm-linked spins for no one but ourselves. A corner where my siblings and I raced together on our bikes from one of our
driveways to the other, pretending we weren’t from the suburbs but instead riding across the open plains on our wild horses. Our backyard was a place where we picked leafy weeds and made believe it was the autumn harvest. It was the location of the Ghostbuster action figures my brother buried in the dirt below the swing set. The side yard was the place where three large lilac bushes grew, the smell of the tiny flower clusters following me everywhere.

I come from a neighborhood where we played freeze tag until after dark, when my mom would call me home from across the street. Where I played tee-ball on Saturdays and practiced grounders in the side yard with my dad in the evenings so I could eventually play somewhere other than right field.

I come from a place where my favorite escape was O’Hara Woods—just down the road and across the street from my house. A place that didn’t look like much from the outside, but where I could let the crisp air fill my lungs, and I thought even my soul. A place where I walked to be alone in humbled muteness.

I come from a family that drove two miles to the Presbyterian church weekly, ate dinner together nightly, and played Sorry or Rack-O or Crazy Eights often. I belong to parents who knew hard times, but never let it show. I come from a place where we all cried, I think even my dad, when we had to put our 18-year-old dog, Boots, to sleep. A place where my dad still waits up for us to come home safe.
Father

When I was a young child my father worked two jobs as a steel fabricator, though he never claimed to be anything more than a welder. The hard work and long hours showed in the grime-filled lines of his face and the permanent shadows beneath his blue eyes. He would come home long after we were in bed and wash the smell of sweaty steel from his body and his wavy brown hair. I never heard him complain.

His jobs only allowed my siblings to see him on Friday evenings, but I woke up each morning at 5:30 to make his lunch while he got ready down the hall in the small bathroom. I packed the same food every day: one ham on rye, one bag of Fritos, a Twinkie, a pickle, and two cans of Pepsi. Every day I pulled his brown lunchbox out from under the kitchen sink and packed the food along with two reusable ice packs. I locked the plastic lid back into place and left the box waiting for him on the gold-flecked counter, right next to the squash-colored refrigerator.

Some days I would watch the Muppet Show in the living room, but usually I sat in a metal kitchen chair—elbows on the table, palms propping up my chin—as I silently watched my dad eat his Wheaties while standing at the kitchen counter. He ate his breakfast in a hurry, and then crisscrossed his laces around the top four notches of his
worn work boots with speedy precision. I always wanted to ask him, “Daddy, why do you have to work so much?” But I never said it. If I had, I know he would have answered simply, as he always did to my early morning questions. He would have paused, laces in midair, and replied, “I’m your father. That’s my job.”
Fridays

Every week was the same. The four of us fought on Friday evenings for the two kitchen chairs next to Dad. We only bickered while he was in the shower, washing sweat and grime from his skin, rubbing his tired muscles with Zest. We all wanted to be close to him to prove he was really there. We wanted to be close enough to smell the Head and Shoulders in his short brown hair.

If Eric sat next to Dad, I couldn’t. Our swinging legs collided under the table, often on purpose, creating a jumble of violently kicking velcroed sneakers as we fought to defend our space. We weren’t allowed to sit across from each other at dinner, but we usually knew better than to fight when Dad was at the table. There would be no advanced warning, no look of disapproval or ignoring us until he had to yell, as Mom sometimes did. He would slam the open palm of his left hand against the table—clattering plastic plates of food, clinking forks against knives, and spilling milk over the tops of our glasses. There wasn’t enough time with him to spend it angry and fighting.

I don’t know if it mattered to our Mom or not, but I always worried that she would have her feelings hurt—we never fought to sit next to her. I wouldn’t have been able to stand it if we’d hurt her, so I sometimes said loudly as we began to take our seats,
"I want to sit by Mom." I was always slightly concerned that maybe I would hurt my father’s feelings—wanting to sit by Mom even though I rarely saw him. Maybe I worried too much.

We usually took turns repeating stories about school and t-ball practices. We had told them all to Mom, but they felt different when we explained and exaggerated to Dad. More impressive. Everything did, even the same food we ate during the rest of the week. Macaroni and cheese and boiled hotdogs just tasted better on Fridays.

My dad was a thin man with arms strong enough for us to hang on, feet big enough for us to stand on, and a thick brown beard that he kept short and neat. He loved to grab a hold of my little fingers and rub his chin back and forth across the back of my hand until I began to squeal and try to pull my hand from his grasp. He always smiled and laughed, and I did too. But deep inside, I hated it. I sometimes worried he was only pretending to laugh too, and was really punishing me for being too close after sitting at the far end of the dinner table, scratching me with his brillo pad beard.

After weeks of Friday evenings practicing, my sisters, brother, and I wanted to prove we were strong, just like Dad. He lay on his back in the middle of the living room’s thinning green carpet. Tracy and I each grabbed a hairy calf, giggling as we wrapped our arms around a leg, hugging it to our bodies. Michelle clutched him by the wrists tightly, and Eric, who was only four, held onto Dad’s head.
We struggled to lift his body, to pick him up as he had done so easily to each of us. We strained our muscles and gritted our teeth. We lifted his heavy body almost an inch from the floor. “We did it! We lifted Dad!” we cheered as we checked to make sure Mom was watching.

But we never practiced putting him back down. Too quickly, he began to slip from sweaty fingers. Eric didn’t even hang onto Dad’s head long enough to keep it from thudding against the floor. We had him for such a brief amount of time, but I believe we all thought it was worth it.
Recalcitrant

Eric sat Indian-style in his vinyl kitchen chair wearing blue Ninja Turtle pajamas. The red elastic bands at the bottom of his pants crept up above his naked feet, exposing his bony ankles and hairless legs.

He sat across from me at the breakfast table and jabbed his spoon into his Fruit Loops covered in too much milk. He brought the overflowing spoon carefully to his lips and flipped it upside down just before shoving it into his mouth. He twisted the spoon with a quick jerk, but not quick enough to avoid milk dribbling down the front of his cotton shirt and wetting the lap of his matching pants.

“You won’t spill if you just put the spoon straight in your mouth like a normal person,” I told him. He simply stared across the table at me as he scooped up another spoonful. He slowly brought it to his mouth and with a deliberate twist of his wrist, dribbled again.
**Breadwinner**

“Gimme the blue one, Tracy.” My sister shoved the blue Rose Art crayon across the kitchen table—rolling it right in the middle of my Transformers coloring book. We colored in silence until I needed red. “Are you done with red yet?” She flung it at me, bouncing it off the shoulder of my nightgown just as Dad opened the back door leading into the tiny kitchen, the screen door’s springs screeching shut behind him.

“Dad’s home!” my sister and I sang out as we knelt on our metal folding chairs and waved crayons above our heads. He worked two jobs, so we usually only saw him on Friday evenings. The joy of Dad on a Tuesday made us both grin as we watched him methodically unlace and slip off his work boots and step into the kitchen, into our daytime world.

But Dad wasn’t alone. Tucked under his right arm was a bright box of Dunkin Donuts. I doubt I could read, but there was no mistaking the logo I always longed for as I lay on the floor watching cartoons each morning. “Donuts!” we cheered.

Our wild commotion brought Mom into the kitchen to check on us.
“Dad’s home. And he has donuts!” I felt the need to explain away her confused look. Her husband, breadwinner, father of four small children, was home from his job at nine in the morning and I screamed, “He has donuts.”

Dad gave her a quick kiss hello, then pulled out the chair at the end of the table and sat with us. “The entire steel shop burned to the ground. I could see it burning a couple miles away.” There were already rumors circulating about arson and the insurance money when the news stations got to the scene.

I understood what my dad was saying, but not what it meant for our family. The pink and orange box sitting in the middle of the kitchen table was as far into the future as I knew.

Mom asked, “What are we going to do now?” as I watched my dad untape the box lid and move the wax paper for us, scooting the box into the center of the table.

“We’re all going to eat donuts for breakfast together!” I answered as Tracy and I dove into the sugary goodness. I’m sure my parents shared a look—concern, despair, perhaps fear. But I didn’t notice. I was too preoccupied with the grape jelly insides of my donut I was oozing into my mouth. All I could think as I licked the granules of pure sugar from my lips was, *This is way better than Chex. We should do this more often.*
The Hat

As the family stood to clear the breakfast table of its dishes, Grandma called for me to follow her. She led me to a spare bedroom where she opened the closet and carefully pulled down a cardboard box filled with hats.

“It’s going to be hot and sunny today in the desert. You better pick out a hat to protect your head.”

“I can pick any of them?” She nodded as I peered into the box and began slowly digging, finally narrowing my choice down to two hats—one with pastel blue and purple flowers pinning back its delicate brim on the right side, and another one.

It took me almost a half hour to decide, weighing the options and asking my grandma and Mom’s advice. But even at the age of six, I realized all along the choice I had to make. My new hat had a big floppy brim, and the brown weave reminded me of the straw hats I had seen on tv. It was plain, but thick and guaranteed by my mom to help keep me cool, which I knew was most important.

We had flown from Chicago to the San Fernando Valley to visit my great grandmother, Addie, and to see the sites of the state. My parents were dedicated to showing their
young children aspects of the world that we’d never seen—palm trees, the ocean, and on today’s agenda, a picnic in the desert.

I sat in the seat behind my father with my knees pressed together as Tracy’s feet straddled the backseat’s center floor-hump. My family of six was packed into my great grandmother’s sedan—the three sisters in back, and four-year-old Eric nested in the narrow middle seat between my parents’ thighs. The sun burst through the windows, magnified by the glass and multiplying the California summer heat.

The highway was never out of our sights, and we ate our packed sandwiches and sucked on drink boxes at a picnic table resting on a concrete slab beneath a steel pavilion. I ventured out from under the shade to experience the sand, the sun, the wind. I wasn’t used to the gusting wind unhindered by houses or trees. It whipped sand at our bodies, our sweat working as a tacky adhesive coating us like shake n’ bake.

The blowing gusts grabbed hold of the floppy straw hat, too big for my head, and sent it cart-wheeling across the top layers of sand. I ran after that hat like I was under water, my feet sinking deep into lumpy sand with each step I took. The sun-burnt granules felt as though they were melting the thin soles of my slip-on keds, but I didn’t care. I couldn’t let that hat blow away—I had gotten it as a gift from my grandma just that morning.
After an afternoon in the sun we all climbed back into the cramped car—tired, burnt, coated with the dry earth. I set my hat down over my naked knee caps, but only after bumping Tracy in the face with it a few times. Our exhaustion showed in different ways. Michelle slept slouched down with her head against the window, Eric fidgeted as my mother pressed him closer to her side to keep him out of the way of my father, whose temper had been shortened by the fact that the desert highway lacked signs and we seemed to be lost.

Still, Tracy’s and my exhaustion escaped in small, high-pitched giggles. My mother shot us a look of warning over her shoulder, though we didn’t pay attention until our father glanced back.

“You two keep it down.” His tone made his frustration clear. The miles of highway stretched out and disappeared into the setting sun. We knew we needed to take notice, and we did. For a few minutes.

I can’t remember what we were even laughing about, maybe the sweaty smell of a car filled with six people, or maybe we had seen a cloud that looked like a butt, or thought Michelle was only pretending to be asleep so she could repeat anything we said later and convince us she was all-seeing, all-knowing. Whatever started it, one look at each other after being reprimanded was enough to break us out into another wave of laughter, both of us trying to suppress it by pressing little fingers against our lips.
My father and I made eye contact in the rearview mirror. He was not amused. His lips were shaped into a tight frown as his eyes narrowed. "If you two don't quit it..."

He didn’t have to finish. We knew. We stopped. But it didn’t take long before my sister’s blue eyes met with mine and we knew there was no stopping it. I took my floppy hat from my lap and held it in front of my face as I slouched down in my seat and leaned closer into the corner. Tracy leaned in too, both of us letting out puffs of air and chokes as we attempted to stifle the noise inside the dome of my straw hat.

Hiding ourselves from my father’s eyes didn’t fool him, or make us any less frustrating. “I told you two to stop it!” he rumbled as he reached his right arm behind his seat. He grabbed the hat out of my fingers by its dome of straw, smashing the entire top half. I tried to hold back the tears as I held the hat that my father had dropped back into my lap.

“I need you girls to behave until I can find the road back to Grandma’s,” my dad explained quietly. I knew it was best to let my tears drop into my hat silently.
"Mom, can I go to the park with Christine?"

Christine was older than me—I was nine she was twelve—and I never saw her outside of Saturday morning t-ball games. Our brothers played together on the BlueJays, the team I was now one year too old for. We came with our moms to “watch,” but we rarely made it through the second inning. The early summer sun beat down on the tops of our heads, the wind blew the infield’s dirt into our eyes, and the hard rainbow plastic benches of the bleachers hurt our butts, even when we sat on our neon windbreakers. We would glance at each other knowingly, hinting with our eyes that we each wanted the other to ask first. Today was my turn.

“As long as you can see when your brother’s game is over,” my mother sighed as she continued looking on to the game, her strawberry blonde hair blowing across her forehead, briefly covering her deep-tinted sunglasses. “I don’t want to have to come find you.”

“We’ll be right at the wood park,” I promised into her hidden eyes as I stood up. Christine easily followed up, checking with her mom, and we were off.
My friend and I linked elbows and walked along the first baseline fence and across the long grass in the deep outfield with as much coolness as our pre-teen selves knew.

I loved playing ball, but watching wasn’t nearly as much fun as pooling our resources to buy a pack of extremely flavored Bubble Yum from the concession stand—our mouths filled with the giant gummy cubes, each of us popping another piece into our mouths as the flavor of the first disappeared—or gossiping on the wooden suspension bridge, jumping and shaking the splintering planks wildly when other kids tried to get too close to our secret hangout.

We talked about boys at school that we liked and the music on the radio station we listened to. Her dark, curly hair fell past her shoulders, and the wind mixed with the stickiness of her AquaNet, tossing her curls into tangles. She wore jean shorts, shorter than I would ever wear, with her long t-shirt knotted to the left. We traded *New Kids on the Block* buttons like baseball cards, and tried on each other’s jelly bracelets as we chewed our gum and popped each other’s pastel pink and green and purple and blue bubbles. We were always sure to peek out of the opening on the park’s top level periodically to be sure the game wasn’t yet over, and that our mothers hadn’t left us. We worried they would every week of that summer.

The summer season ended and Christine’s brother moved up an age division to little league the following year. I never did see her again. I think I may have stopped going to
my brother's games altogether. I don't remember ever going to the park alone, and I
doubt I matured enough in that year to sit and watch my brother play t-ball for seven
long innings.

We were two young girls who came together for two hours a week for two
months to play at the park and foolishly waste 75 cents on instantly flavorless gum
because it was better than sitting still beside our mothers. But so many years later when I
pay for a fill-up at the gas station or run into 7-11 for milk and see rows of wild Bubble
Yum flavors I still remember that summer of playing at the park, just me and Christine.
The ice cream truck couldn’t excite me. It seemed like my siblings and I were the only kids on the block who never chased the tinkling bells down the street waving wrinkled and sticky dollar bills.

We watched as the freezer on wheels gleefully rolled past the front of our house and on around the corner along our side yard where I pushed my sister from behind in our red wagon. Michelle sat cross-legged on the faded Rainbow Bright blanket that lined the rusted bottom and steered expertly down the bumpy sidewalk. I sat backwards—my back pressed to my older sister’s—and pushed my dirty sneakers against the pavement as fast as I could. I frantically kicked my legs, conscious of my shorts riding up too high, knowing that the hot red steel would scorch the backs of my thighs if I wasn’t careful. This was our go kart, and this was my turn to be the motor.

The sweltering summer heat forced us to force ourselves into going too fast—praying the wagon wouldn’t tip as we hit the bumps and patches of grass growing in between the sidewalk cracks—in an attempt to create a breeze, no matter how small. As we rounded the corner heading to the side of the house, Michelle pulled the black steering handle too tight to the right, tipping us both out into the grass.
We scrambled out from under the hot steel and stretched ourselves in the grass. We lay there, watching as the ice cream man parked his truck and helped our neighbors next to our parkway pine tree. We silently watched as the kids ran across our grass for this man's frozen goodness.

“Hey. Why aren’t you guys getting anything?” Nikki from across the street demanded.

“They always have the same old thing. It’s all so lame,” I said as I shook my head. Nikki looked astonished. She was a year older in school than me, and to me, much cooler. Her bangs were teased and sprayed, and her neon pink spandex shorts seemed to cling to her curvy body in just the right places. She rested her hand on her hip, just above her black shirt clip and looked down at me in the grass.

“What? Did you ever even have the bubble gum clown?”

“I got that last time.”

“Really? I never see you get ice cream.”

“He always seems to come around just after lunch. Right after we finish eating,” I said with a shrug. Michelle and I decided to gather up our blanket and head into the house.

Mom always said, “Why should I pay a dollar for an ice cream bar when we have an entire box of popsicles in the freezer?” But I wanted nothing more than to join my friends at the side of that white truck. I wanted to trade my crumpled dollar bill for an
ice cream face with a piece of pink bubble gum as a nose. But I learned very early on that there was no use asking. We had popsicles in the freezer.

We didn't have bubblegum, but we did have our choice of purple, orange, or green—the reds and blues always seemed to already be gone. Michelle just said forget it and went off to the bedroom, but I picked out a green one. Mom pulled the perforated plastic casing away from the others in the strip, and cut off the top of the plastic tube with her orange-handled kitchen scissors so I could push up, and enjoy.

After I was sure the ice cream truck was long gone I went back outside and spread the blanket out in the grass in the front yard underneath the big shady tree, which was much cooler than inside the un-air-conditioned house. I heard my dad start up the lawnmower in the side yard as I spread myself out for my pretend picnic. I enjoyed licking my iced treat as my skin began to cool, and I thought about the sticky kids running around in the sun. When they weren't around, I loved my popsicle. I squeezed the frozen ice up to the top, and then let it drop back into the green juice that had accumulated in the bottom.

I heard the mower coming closer, and so moved up onto the front porch and watched my dad intently as he worked. The hot rays beat down, warming the top of his head until the beads of perspiration began to one by one form and slowly roll down his face. Each one made a new path as it coolly slithered along the back of his sunburned neck and disappeared under his collar. I watched as the beads began to soak his shirt.
The green grass stained his sneakers, the only defense the thin blades had against the roaring mower. I breathed in the ripe scent of dying grass as I leaned back on my elbows, feeling the pebbles transforming my once smooth skin into that of an armadillo’s. I brought my cold popsicle to my lips as I looked up at the clouds for a shape that would hint at what was to come.
The Jumper

I began preparing with my older sisters, needing to be dressed before our Thanksgiving guests arrived. As I stood in front of the open closet and attempted to choose a dress, Michelle and Tracy decided it was their duty to help.

I shared the master bedroom of our house on Arnold Ave with my two sisters. We each overflowed two drawers in the dresser, two shelves on the vertical shoe rack my father built for us, and one drawer each in the desk. Instead of one closet rod to cram all of our shirts on, my father built four rods in the other direction for more room. Each of the rods extended from the back wall to the front wall on either side of the closet door—two up high and two down low.

The lowest bars, filled with t-shirts and fuzzy winter sweaters, were mine and Tracy’s, while Michelle had a tall one for her wild prints and hip colors, which seemed very much the fad among her middle school friends. The fourth closet bar was shared, filled with dresses in different stages of being handed down from garage sale, to sister, to sister. This bar was my favorite. I rarely wore a skirt, but I loved wearing things mixed in with Michelle and Tracy’s.
"You should wear this," Michelle said as she pulled out a grey corduroy jumper with a matching pink and grey button-down shirt underneath the dress’s bib and ruffled straps. “It doesn’t even fit me or Tracy anymore.”

“It doesn’t look like it’s going to fit me either,” I replied as I took it from her outstretched hand.

“Just try it on and see.” I buttoned each of the shirt’s little white buttons and tried to pull the grey corduroy over my head.

“I can’t get it.”

“Here, let me help,” Tracy said. “Put your arms up.” I lifted my arms straight up over my head and held them rigid as Tracy attempted to pull the dress down over me. “I don’t think this is going to fit her,” she said as she turned to Michelle.

“No, she just needs to wiggle into it. Jenny, wiggle while we pull.” Together they worked, alternating their tugs until the jumper was in the right place.

“I think it looks good,” Michelle said, stepping back to admire her work.

“I can’t breathe. I don’t think I want to wear this.”

“You have to. Me and Tracy can’t wear it anymore. It’s been all of ours, and now this is going to be the last time any of us will ever get to wear it.” My sisters convinced me that it didn’t look too tight, and of how important it was for me to wear that dress.

I sat that evening at dinner stiff and stuffed into my little grey dress, happy to be carrying on some sisterly legacy. After our guests all left that night, though, I couldn’t
wait to tear off that outfit. I headed back to our bedroom to change for bed, but the jumper wouldn’t budge. It took two sisters to get it on, and it looked as though I’d need their help to get it off. I tried to remain calm and breezy as I called them to come back into the bedroom for a moment, not wanting Mom to suspect anything.

They tried to help by tugging and giving advice. “Suck in your stomach a little more,” “Try holding your breath.” But nothing worked. My sides hurt from the rubbing fabric, but also from laughing. Somehow being frantic about my inability to ever escape this dress turned into the three of us hooting about how I would have to wear this dress for the rest of my life, or at least until I grew so big I busted out of it like the Incredible Hulk.

The decision was finally made. “We’re gonna have to cut her out of it,” Michelle said as she got the scissors out of her desk drawer. “Hold up your arm and hold still.” I took her direction very seriously as she grabbed the seam just below my armpit, pulled it away from my body as far as she could manage, and made a small snip. She passed the scissors across to Tracy, handle first, as we switched sides with surgeon-like silence. Another snip.

It wasn’t enough. Both cut further down the sides of the dress and then pulled as I tried to collapse my rib cage—praying for help from God, just has I’d learned in Sunday School.
The corduroy jumper was finally yanked free from my body as we breathed a joint sigh. But we immediately realized our bigger fear—Mom would find out we cut the dress. I don’t know why we would have thought she would be mad about a dress that didn’t fit any of us anymore, but we knew better than to waste something that was in perfectly good condition, and in our young minds, this dress fell under that category.

“We better just hang it up and put it near the back,” Tracy said. “Then Mom won’t see it.”

“Smash it in tight between other dresses,” I added as Michelle reached up into the closet. We were in on this secret together.
Echo

I knew Kristi. She was in the other fourth grade class, and we talked at assemblies or after class. She knew who I knew, so we had shared several slumber and birthday parties. But that day we were not sharing the fun together. She wore red and I was dressed in yellow.

In minors, inexperience was abundant. At eleven, I found myself a heavy-hitter. I was at the old end of the age range (8-12), and I had been playing ball since I was six, while many girls were new to the game.

I came up to the plate. As I brought my swing around I dropped my shoulder, sending the ball high in the air and shallow in the grass. I half-heartedy jogged to first. I knew it was going to be caught. I already knew I was out.

Kristi played short-centerfield (girls got a fourth outfielder until majors). I imagined her satisfaction in being the one to get me out. Being teased by her at school in front of all the boys flashed through my mind as we all waited for the pop-up to drop. She centered herself under the ball, held her arms up straight—glove opened wide for the catch, her bare hand nearby to cover the ball as it fell into the mitt, the coach’s mantra, “use two hands!” probably running through her mind.
Kristi caught the ball. With her face.

She never moved. Her arms were like field goal uprights, the ball rushing through them for the extra point. My jog to first became a quick sprint to the base.

“Time!” The umpire headed out to the outfield, gesturing with his head for Kristi’s coach to go with him. I turned to my dad, the first base coach, with a look of guilt.

“I didn’t mean to hurt her,” I said as I looked down at my feet and kicked loose dirt from the top of the base.

My dad did not share my regret. “Hey. She should’ve used the brown thing. That’s what it’s there for.”

After the game both teams lined up. Hand claps and the repetition of “good game, good game” turned into an unintelligible mass of sound. I stopped Kristi, an ice pack still covering half of her forehead and one eye.

“I’m really sorry about that,” I said, pointing towards her head.

“I can’t believe you hit me! I’m not talking to you ever again!” She turned on her heel and left me standing alone on the field.

In school the next day, after hearing that she was describing how I intentionally hurt her to everyone in the fourth grade, I no longer felt so sorry. She could tell her version of what had happened, and I would tell mine. All day I repeated with a laugh, “Geez! Why didn’t she use the giant brown thing attached to her hand instead of using her face? That’s what it’s there for.”
Little Fish

From the age of eight to the age of twelve I was a powerhouse at the plate. My long balls consistently fell into deep left-center, forcing both the left and center fielders to race through the grass, hats flying off their heads and clinging upside down to the top of their ponytails as they ran.

As starting shortstop, I nabbed quick line drives and dug fast-rolling grounders out of the dirt, snapping them off to first from deep behind the base path. I loved being a star. My dad warned me, though. He didn’t want me to forget that even though I was a “big fish in a little pond” now, the next year I would be moving up an age division. I knew the time would come, but I wasn’t ready to be a little fish.

In minors I was cool because the red Huffy I rode to practices had “ram handles.” Moving up to majors meant that many of the girls, who looked more like grown women, drove their own cars. I no longer rode my bike, either, but instead got a ride to games and practices with my two older sisters and the coach, who happened to be our dad. I was nervous as we drove to the first practice of the season.
The teal minivan pulls neatly in between the yellow lines of the parking space. As the van comes to a complete stop, the sliding door is pulled open and a young, frightened looking girl cautiously hops out, her blond ponytail swinging lightly behind her. She pulls up her oversized sweatpants and double checks that her black cleats are still laced tight. Her small, worn glove is cradled in her left arm like a football as she timidly approaches the field.

The girls begin pounding on the chain link fence along the third baseline—some screaming obscenities, others chanting, “Fresh fish,” as they all scowl at the unwanted newcomer. The small girl hugs her glove closer to her chest as she realizes she has just entered a world unlike anything she has ever seen before.

I fit in better than I had imagined—no one talked to me except my sisters. I looked down the two evenly spaced rows of girls playing catch to warm up in the grassy outfield—the sun still up high, the wind blowing in from the west—and I knew I didn’t really belong. As hard throws were being snapped off all around me, I was repeatedly one-hopping the ball into my sister Michelle’s ankles and shins. Balls were zinging into the leather pockets of gloves as my sore left hand let most of the balls pop out and fly behind me, causing me to warm up my legs chasing rather than my arms catching and throwing.

Maybe it was just nerves. All players were guaranteed two innings per game, but it looked like I would spend my two with the dandelions in deep right. Some coaches
favor their children by giving them the best positions and the most playing time, but I knew I didn’t have that luxury. My dad wanted to win more than he wanted to give me a false sense of self-confidence, and so I earned my position on the field, just like everyone else.

After practice the team brought in the bases and gathered the equipment into a pile in the grass behind the backstop. My dad sat down on the five-gallon pickle bucket that stored the balls while the team sat cross-legged in the grass, some drinking water from white foam cups, others kicking off their dusty cleats, or fixing their matted hat-hair. I already knew what was coming—one privilege of living with the coach. Our team needed someone to be a catcher. What an exciting position, I thought.

_Eleven dirty arms shoot into the air—fingers waving wildly. Everyone wants the responsibility and the glory of leading the team from behind the plate. The fresh fish sees that this is her opportunity to play more innings, the entire game in fact, and she raises her little arm, too. The girls around her stifle giggles as they roll their eyes and nudge their friends. There is only one way to settle this. The team must have a catchers’ duel._

_Girls suit up in armor of red, navy, or royal blue. The little fish is the only one dressed in black. They take their places as the tournament begins, six pairs of girls facing off with their feet apart, knees bent, hands in the ready position. The little fish glares out_
from under her furrowed brow, baring her clenched teeth from behind the steel bars of the mask.

The girls battle until purple bruises cover their skin and blood oozes from their flesh. Anything goes as the girls continue to claw, punch, and kick throughout the night. As the sun begins to rise over the horizon the next morning, they realize that only one warrior remains standing. The tired girls’ eyes widen as they gasp and look down at their feet with sheepish respect. The little fish has won the tournament, the responsibility of defending the plate, and most importantly, the respect of her teammates.

As my dad explained that catching would be a good opportunity for someone to pick up extra innings, the girls looked down or away, some concentrating on picking blades of grass and tying them into knots with their dirty fingers.

“You don’t have to tell me today, but think about it. Someone has to play back there.”

On the way home I leaned forward from my bench seat in the van and told my dad I wanted to catch. I was small, but I could make up for it by learning technique. My dad agreed to consider it. It turned out that no one wanted to fight me for it, so I was the catcher.

The following Saturday I took a trip with my dad to Sports Authority to pick out my new gear. I had been thinking about that shopping trip for a week.
The young girl looks down the long aisle of equipment. Mitts, bats, balls, bags, and helmets are lined up on evenly spaced shelves that almost reach the ceiling. The bright fluorescent tubes shine and reflect off the gear, creating a mirror image on the white, polished tile.

She slowly walks down the aisle taking in all of the choices—the endless combinations of colors, styles, sizes. The entire afternoon is spent trying on equipment until she finds the perfect pieces that fit her snuggly, yet are comfortably padded. She chooses all glossy black gear, except for her softened tan glove, which she decides to wear home.

As it turned out, the authority in sporting equipment didn’t have much to offer. We had trouble finding a chest protector, shin guards, or a facemask that would fit properly. As an adolescent female I was too big for the baseball boys’ size, but too small for the men’s. The knees of the plastic shin guards either covered my mid-shin, or my upper thigh. We chose to go with the ones that were too big. I would grow into them. Even when the nylon straps were cinched as tight as they could go, the chest protector hung from my body, leaving my collarbones exposed. We would have to pin it. There were no softball catcher’s mitts. We would try to stretch the pocket of one built for baseballs.
There was one piece of equipment that was designed for women, but I refused to wear it. My dad wanted me to wear a cup.

I had never known there was such a thing as a female cup, and I may not have volunteered for the job if I had. Rather than the hard plastic of the male version, the female variety was made of firm foam.

I looked up at my dad, and then back at the pegs on the wall supporting rows of packaged protection divided by size. I leaned in closer to him so no one could hear me.

"I’m not a man, Dad. I don’t need a cup."

"It’s still a vulnerable area that needs protection.” I believed him, but I didn’t want an uncomfortable lump added to the list of equipment I put on for each game. I didn’t want to become known as the girl who had a bulge in the front of her pants.

"I won’t ever wear it."

"Well, if you’re not worried, then that’s fine. I’m not going to force you.” I was willing to take the chance. We left with the equipment, and I was ready to play. I couldn’t wait for the season opener.

_The umpire struts out onto the field carrying his mask in one hand and a black whiskbroom in the other. He dusts off home plate, tucks his broom into his back pocket, and straightens his starched baby blue button-down shirt._

"Play ball!”
The little fish, suited in her full-body armor, takes the field with the rest of her team. She stands in her chalk-lined box behind the freshly cleared plate and looks at the backs of her teammates jogging out to their positions, their ponytails waving in the slight breeze. The afternoon sun warms her face as she pushes her helmet and mask down onto her head—foam pads cradling her forehead, chin, and ears. She squats and confidently takes the warm-up pitches. She is ready to lead the team to victory.

The first game of the season is about to begin.

“You guys ready yet? Let’s go. Batter up.” I waddled out onto the field after my teammates, my stomach filled with quivering butterflies. The umpire kicked most of the dirt from the buried plate with the sole of his sneaker, and pulled his wrinkled blue shirt over his belly, tucking it back into his trousers.

“Come on. Batter up!” This was it. I was ready to show my team and my dad that I belonged in this position. I was a little scared, but more excited. I was pumped.

I sucked.

I was awkward in my stiff, new armor. The oversized equipment banged against my body and got in the way of my arms. Pitches got past me, and runners were stealing bases as I lumbered around trying to find the ball. I couldn’t see to the sides of me because of the thick grate that covered my face. My plastic knees clacked against each other and the bottoms of my shin guards dragged through the soft dirt. Even when the
pitches hit me directly in the mitt the ball popped out because my weak hand could barely close the week-old stiff thing—the new leather retaliated against my every effort.

I never imagined all of that gear would be so heavy. But it wasn't just heavy, it was also extremely hot. Sweat soaked my hair and dripped into my ears and eyes. My saturated shirt clung to my stomach and my back. I could no longer find a dry place to wipe my sweaty forearms and palms.

When I had volunteered for this position I didn't actually realize what the rest of my team must have—I would be wearing what felt like fifty pounds of hot plastic and sweaty foam for three hours during Saturday afternoons in the middle of July.

I wanted to tear the equipment from my body the moment the game was over. I wouldn't even drop it in the dugout. Just flinging it out on the field. I wanted nothing more to do with the sweaty, dirty, heavy, crap. I sucked. Catching sucked.

But I didn't really have a choice. My dad had paid for all of the equipment, and there was no way he would let me quit the position after only one game. I wouldn't get much playing time anywhere else, anyway, and it was better than sitting on the bench.

I wanted to play ball. I continued catching because I thought about my future. I knew if I worked hard, one day I would fill out the gear and grow into a strong player, just as I had worked for other positions in the past. I hadn't forgotten what it felt like to be a big fish. I imagined being there again, and that was enough to keep me going.
Tracy, Dad and I arrived. As we began pulling equipment from the back of the minivan, Melissa got out of her car.

“I didn’t know where we were going to practice, so I just waited for you,” Melissa said as she walked over, tossing a ball up in the air and basket-catching it as she came.

“Nicole already got on the field for us. She’s trying to hold it by herself,” coach said as he pointed at Nicole standing on the field. Melissa tossed the ball up again, but it tipped off the end of her glove, sending it into the side of the van with a thud.

“Sorry,” Melissa said as she went after the ball rolling across the parking lot’s blacktop. Melissa was not new to our team, but she always kept herself separate from the other girls. She always seemed slightly awkward as her long legs carried her thin frame, and her white-blond ponytail, always smooth and never under a hat, shook and bounced as she moved. She was usually bored by the repetition of drills and often missed practices.

The four of us carried the practice equipment to the field where Nicole was waiting—two bags of catcher’s equipment, helmets and bats, two pickle buckets of balls, a set of bases, a five-gallon jug of water, and the med-kit.
“Nice job, Nicole. What time d’you get here? Four o’clock?” Coach asked.

“No, I’ve been camping out here since six this morning,” Nicole joked.

Nicole had gotten to practice early to stake out any open ball field. The field for varsity softball was, surprisingly, still empty a little after 5pm, so Nicole with her pair of dusty cleats and leather glove had sat down on the dugout’s long silver bench, prepared to ward off any other teams. Although we were all in our late teens, many other male coaches tried to intimidate the few girls on the field into leaving before my dad and the majority of the team got there.

The high school was a prime practice spot. When school was out for summer the vacant soccer fields, football practice field, and six ball diamonds were up for grabs. We, along with every other team, always tried to get a field. We wanted to have a backstop to catch wild pitches or mis-timed swings, and to let the infielders workout on the dirt. Of the three fields our team could use (the boy’s fields had large mounds of dirt in the pitcher’s circle) the varsity was in the best condition and the most in-demand.

We started with the same drills we always needed. Infielders formed a line in the second baseman’s position, taking turns fielding the grounders Coach fun-go hit to us. As half the team worked in the dirt, our assistant coach led a parallel drill in the outfield. He stood on the left field foul line hitting a mixture of grounders and fly balls to a single-file line of girls in center field.
After eight or nine years of coaching, my father had perfected the fun-go hit—tossing the ball up with his left hand, smoothly swinging the aluminum bat with his right. He could easily control the ball's speed, height, and location, mixing up the hits for each player, and softening his hits for those of us who struggled more than others with grounders.

Our assistant coach was not as precise. He was more than willing to try, but without much practice, he was sending pop ups over his squad’s heads, and forcing them to chase down grounders far to their left side. The back of our line watched, feeling bad for the girls who had to chase down the wild hits.

The outfield fence wasn’t too far from his girls, so it wasn’t very surprising when the assistant coach hit the ball over the fence.

“I’ll get it!” Melissa yelled as she ran after the ball.

“I haven’t seen her run that fast all season,” Jami whispered to me from the back of our line.

“No kidding. I didn’t know she actually could run,” I whispered back as Melissa climbed the outfield’s chainlink fence. She rested halfway over, sitting perched with her back to the team on the yellow curve of hard plastic that protected outfielders from the spiky fence top.

There were plenty of balls left in the bucket, but no one objected. They continued their drill, the assistant coach resumed wildly hitting. He tossed the next ball
up, swung through, and connected with it. “Heads up!” he yelled. For the first time that
day, he hit two balls to the same place.

Thunk.

It hit Melissa squarely in the back. She wavered only for a second before tipping
over the fence and toppling into the grass outside of the field.

“Oh shit!” slipped from the assistant’s lips.

The drills stopped. Everyone looked. Melissa slowly got up.

“Are you alright?” Nicole called. Melissa tossed her glove to the ground and
started straightening her hair. She appeared to be okay.

Someone, I’m not sure who, let out a nervous laugh. No one was happy to see
Melissa get hit, but the laughter quickly spread across the field. Jami and I looked at each
other and both burst out. One giggling girl started the next one, until everyone was
laughing at the unbelievable sight we had just witnessed. Everyone but Melissa. She
didn’t think it was funny at all. The humor of the situation did not cross the barrier of
that outfield fence. Maybe she was too far from the rest of the team for it to be passed
on.
Apropos

The loud, echoing ping of aluminum shouted that this ball was going far. It went to deep center, and all I could do was hope our centerfielder was quick enough to catch up to it in time.

The Gold vs. the Slammers.

We’d faced the same girls in head-to-head competition every summer since I was eight, and six years later, the hometown rivalry had evolved from friendly competition to a fierce need to win. These two games a season were more important than any others against any other town we would play all summer. The Slammers felt it too. Both sides wanted to confidently pass their opponents in the hallways of high school, knowing they were the better team.

Runners rounded the bases as the center fielder chased down the ball. Her throw was in midair from deep in the grass to the shortstop’s poised glove as the lead runner rounded third base without hesitation. I took another step out in front of the plate—knees and toes pointed towards third, legs straddling the chalk, glove up and ready. The shortstop made a quick catch-throw in one fluid motion. The ball met my mitt with a resounding leather-on-leather pop. My right hand firmly gripped the ball as I tucked it
deep into the pocket of my glove. She came barreling closer and I leaned my weight forward slightly, ready to drop to my knees when she dropped into her slide.

She didn’t go down into a graceful slide to avoid my tag. She didn’t even throw herself to the ground in an uncoordinated heap like the other girls who were scared of sliding. Instead, she hesitated and slowed ever so slightly before running straight for homeplate, ramming into me, and slamming us both to the ground. I knelt on the plate in confusion.

My hand. I didn’t know. Was it on fire? Was it even still there? I couldn’t feel it. I couldn’t focus. Pain radiated from my wrist as tears began sliding down my dirty cheeks. I knew the ball was gone. I could see it—it had rolled out in front of the plate. She lay there trying to catch her breath as I knelt on the plate, her third base coach shaking his finger at the ball, excitedly repeating to the ump, “She dropped the ball! She dropped the ball!”

The umpire knew the rule—she had to avoid contact. She was out, but I felt no solace. She would have been out anyways. She did not apologize or ask if I was alright. But when our teams faced each other a few weeks later, she did offer to sign my cast. Sadly, I had to say no. My teammates had gotten to it first.
Addie

I sat in a stiff plastic blue chair, matching the rest in the second row. About fifteen others sat with me as we faced forward looking at an empty casket rented from the funeral parlor, her ashes securely in a box in the other room, and an eight by ten photo of my great grandma, Addie, resting on an easel. My mother, sisters, and brother had been crying all morning, but I didn’t tear up once. My father laughed as he put his arm around me and gave my shoulder a little squeeze—the Tolands (my mother’s side of the family) always cry, but Maddoxs sure don’t. A part of me felt like I should have been crying, showing some sort of emotion, but another, larger part was happy to have my father’s approval.

As we waited for the service to begin, I thought back to my great grandma’s apartment, and one of the last times we saw her there. She had sat in her maroon-backed wheelchair with its impressively large wheels and rusted silver finish. The bottoms of her mint sweatpants stopped halfway down her bloated white calves. A crumpled tissue was strapped to the inside of her sweatshirt cuff—always there hugging her wrist—poking out slightly, tentatively, like a rabbit from its hole.
She always sat there in that maroon and silver chair only an arm’s-length away from the television, watching indifferently as another game of golf blared from the fifty-two inch screen. Every Sunday we went to visit my great grandmother. Every Sunday was the same. The television too loud, the apartment too hot, the smell overwhelming. I always thought the apartment was too stuffy, but without fail she would pull on another sweater and tuck her afghan more tightly around her lap.

She had moved from her home in California to an apartment in a retirement village thirty minutes from our home in the Chicago suburbs. My great grandma worked out every single day—stretching, some calisthenics or light workouts. She knew what it was like to struggle through the Depression as a young girl, she attended a business college and worked full-time for most of her life. But once she had her first stroke in her mid-eighties she had to slow down and learn to be content with pushing her husband’s wheelchair around the halls of the apartment building and down to dinner. She had to get used to having a nurse assist her into and out of the shower. She slowly began to act more her age. She eventually had a wheelchair of her own.

My family would head to Addie’s apartment to visit, balancing greasy paper plates of take-out food from Portillo’s or Arby’s or Brown’s Chicken on our laps. We held plastic party cups filled with warm soda between our knees as the golf announcer’s mock whisper blared from the television.
Addie’s new apartment was small. The living room was filled with furniture to the point that it was difficult to get everyone into the room. We were always backing out and off to the side to let someone else through. It was almost impossible for Addie to navigate her wheelchair between the furniture and around the people.

In front of the window was a small folding card table with two green plastic lawn chairs. There was a salmon colored love seat, and an elaborate oversized rocking chair that appeared to have been passed down through generations. Addie covered the chair’s muted paisley cushions with bath towels for protection. Against the wall opposite the window was a twin-sized cot. She bought it so her great grandchildren could feel free to spend the night whenever they wanted. It was usually covered in coats and large knit sweaters, a week’s worth of newspapers, and Addie’s silver cane. I would stack her belongings to one side and sit on the corner of the cot.

As we sat uncomfortably cramped, visiting Sunday after Sunday, Addie would begin to retell a select few favorite stories, or laugh about how when she died she wanted us to sprinkle her ashes in the river just a few blocks away so when we went to feed the ducks, we could also feed Grandma.

She would spend each week talking about her relatives, dead and alive, with pride. *See—Maddoxs work hard, Maddoxs never give up,* she would say. She sometimes mistook my dad for his uncle, her son, Gary, who had long passed away. But she rarely
forgot to turn to my mom during one of these stories and remind her that she would never *really* be a Maddox, *not like Randy and the kids.*

While Addie would talk, I sat on the edge of the cot wishing that the smell of urine hadn’t taken over her apartment. I wished she still had Crystal to blame it on. Then I could scream at the dog, “Stupid Crystal! Stop peeing on the couch!” But, as we all knew, there was no longer a dog. The pungent odor forced me to sit with my arms crossed in front of my chest, casually placing the back of my hand under my nose, and pressing it against my nostrils.

I sat on the corner of Addie’s cot, pressing my chicken-scented fingers forcefully against my nose. The small apartment was always hot and stuffy and cramped and foul smelling. But each week I went back. She never wanted her life to end that way. She never wanted to be remembered by her family in that way. I went back to listen to her talk. I went back to hear memories that would help me remember more than her last few years.

For several years she bounced back and forth following strokes of different severity. She would go to the hospital, then stay a stint in a nursing home, and then be recovered enough to head back to her apartment in her assisted living community. Sometimes I would forget that this was the vibrant woman who was an extra in the movie *Rocky,* or the grandma who reached over the table at the *Show Biz Pizza* party to snatch a gulp from my dad’s beer after finishing her own. But I would always be
reminded when she and my dad talked as she lay in her hospital bed. She spent most of her days sleeping, but would get excited each evening my father came to visit after he got off work. I sat off to the side in a vinyl covered wingback chair listening as she tried to convince him to sneak her in a Portillo’s cheeseburger. Telling him that the doctors didn’t know what they were doing, that it wouldn’t hurt anything. She pleaded—she needed real food.

After one particularly severe stroke, the doctor told her if she did not have surgery, she only had a ten percent chance of making it. She told him okay. No surgery.

But even then, her body refused to give up. She survived, even when she was willing not to. Her body came back, despite her best efforts.

It wasn’t long before she was back in the nursing home. I watched as she slowly wasted away, but my younger brother, Eric, dealt with the deterioration of our great grandmother differently—he avoided visiting her. Finally my dad told him that it would be a good idea for him to come say goodbye to Grandma while she could still recognize him.

My brother entered the stale nursing home for the first time and commented on the smell of urine that had saturated every porous inch of that place. My brother entered unprepared. The translucent skin hung loosely from Addie’s body. Her vibrant eyes appeared dull, and stared at nothing in particular. Slouched in her wheelchair, she barely noticed that “the boy,” as she had always lovingly called him, had come to see her.
We sat around an oval table in a lounge set up for visitors. As my dad began to talk to Addie I glanced at Eric, whose eyes were beginning to shine with moisture, tears welling up as he worked hard to fight them back, not wanting to bring his hand up to his face—not wanting to attract any attention.

No one warned him of what he would see. I forgot how much she had changed since he last saw her. I needed to help. Eric was sixteen, but still my baby brother. I mentioned to him across the table that there was a big cage filled with parakeets around the corner, and asked him if he wanted to check them out. He quickly agreed to come with me.

Around the corner he was free to wipe his eyes and compose his feelings. We stayed there for awhile looking at the chirping birds that were going to spend the rest of their lives trapped in this cage, having visitors stop by periodically to praise their bright feathers and sadly sweet songs. After some time I gave my brother’s shoulder a squeeze and we silently headed back.

Our pastor, John, performed my great grandmother’s funeral service with his usual mixture of passion, charm, and improvisation. He laughed as he described how she allowed herself one beer a day, hinting at the Show Biz Pizza story that my dad had shared with him the night before at dinner. He talked of how she used to love dancing the “Macadamia” in the driveway with her great grandchildren, though it was really the “Macarena.”
I looked at the photograph of my grandmother as John spoke, and I felt like she was there, smiling behind those eyes. This loving, funny woman was gazing back at me, laughing at the inaccuracies of some of the stories that were told, knowing that in the end it wasn’t that important.
Tracy and I slowly dragged ourselves home from the bus stop Friday after our practice, drenched in sweat and coated in a thin layer of the infield. We arrived home sore from our high school practices every weeknight with grass-stained sweatpants.

After washing up, I collapsed into my chair at the dinner table and gulped ice water. As I drank, I eyed my sister as she awkwardly ate Mom’s pork roast and mashed potatoes across from me—a giant blue icepack strapped to her pitching shoulder with an elastic band and velcro.

“How was practice?” our dad asked neither of us in particular as he sat down with a glass of iced tea.

“Fine.” I was frustrated that I never worked on catching drills. I always stood next to my sophomore team’s coach at the plate and caught the throws coming in as the infield worked on grounders.

My coach was gentle and kind compared to Tracy’s varsity coach, but Tracy rarely shared my frustration.

“I pitched pretty well,” Tracy said. “Spent a lot of time working on my change-up.”
“Oh yeah? Hitting your locations?” Dad hustled to secure Tracy’s velcro as they discussed pitching. Mom poured Tracy more iced tea so she wouldn’t have to lift her arm.

I ate my potatoes.

I knew I didn’t want Tracy’s shoulder pain. And yet, a part of me wanted the attention that was attached to that icepack.

My JV team and I headed to the locker room after a hot Saturday game. Coach held a team meeting, listing the errors we’d made and the number of sprints we would be doing at Monday’s practice to make up for them. I dragged myself to an open sink and pumped pink soap into my hand. I scrubbed my arms clean to the elbows, and headed back out to the field. I pulled up a lawn chair next to my parents to settle in and watch my sister’s varsity game.

I tugged the bill of my hat down as the afternoon sun lowered in the sky. I zoned out as the game began. I couldn’t wait to get home, shower, eat, take a nap after squatting for two hours. I thought about heaping conditioner onto the straw that my hair had become, eating a big slice of leftover meatloaf, and stretching out on the couch. Maybe I would watch a movie. Or maybe I’d just lie there.

The crowd’s clapping and cheering brought me back. Tracy was on first. I had no clue how she got there—maybe she hit a blooper to the edge of the grass, or the fielder
bobbled her hit and Tracy was able to outrun the throw. Maybe she just got walked. But now I paid attention.

The pitcher pulled her right hand from the glove as she began her motion. She released the ball, Tracy exploded off first. The wild pitch sailed past the catcher and loudly clanked against the backstop. I stood, clapped, screamed, “Go go go!” with the rest of her team.

She went down into her slide, right leg bent underneath her, the left one straight in front, both hands up off the ground. She must have caught a glimpse of what we all saw—the catcher’s throw flying over the shortstop’s head and into centerfield.

Tracy attempted to stop herself from sliding so she could round the base and steal third, but the plastic cleat of her straight leg caught in the hard, gravelly dirt of the field, jamming her knee severely to the side. Her body fell hard.

She rocked on her back, held her leg, and let out a painful wail. All I could do was sit and watch with wide eyes as my sister jerked in pain in the dirt behind second base.

“‘The play’s not over! What are you doing? The ball’s not dead! The. Ball’s. Not. Dead!’ The other team’s head coach had jumped out of her dugout and onto the field. She waved her arms in frustrated hysterics, yelling at her confused center fielder.

The girl jogged in from the edge of the grass and gently touched Tracy on the shoulder. Ball in hand.
“She’s out!” The umpire made the call.

“I would have been so safe. He should have called an injury timeout.” I could hear her as our dad and her coach helped her off the field. A teammate ran across the field to the varsity baseball game to get the school’s athletic trainer who was always there. He wasn’t in the dugout for long, but he’d wrapped ice around Tracy’s knee, and left her to prop her leg up on the bench.

As Dad and the trainer left the dugout I heard him tell my father, “It looks like she tore her ACL.” And then he added with a little laugh, “Looks like that’s the end of her softball career.”

The orthopedist agreed. Tracy had torn her ACL—a ligament needed to stabilize her knee. She had to have surgery. After weeks of waiting for the swelling to go down, Tracy entered the hospital the day after her graduation.

I stood in the kitchen and peered around the corner as Tracy lay with her back pressed to the living room’s tan carpeting. Her movement was limited to the downstairs since she had gotten home. Her disheveled hair was lumped into an oily ponytail, her face was red, her eyes puffy.

Our father held her calf firmly just above the ankle as he slowly bent and straightened Tracy’s swollen knee in a series of doctor-prescribed after-surgery stretches. Her soft, bloated leg was lifted and straightened and bent and twisted. She clenched her
jaw and closed her eyes tightly as tears silently rolled across her cheeks. Tracy and our father worked her knee this way twice every day.

She struggled to fight back tears, often crying out in pain. But I never heard her whine for sympathy. I realized, as I watched from the kitchen, hidden and unnoticed, the real reason I envied her.
I cannot spell. I have been told throughout seventeen years of formal education to simply sound things out, but that usually doesn’t work. I can’t use a computer spell-check program. I am not even close enough for spell check to take a guess. I shove pieces of paper and neon computer disks out of my way, some falling onto the floor, as I search for my pocket dictionary again, which was a gift from my grandma, Doris.

Every New Year’s Day my family would head to my grandma’s apartment for “Happy Bags.” “Happy Bags” was a holiday my grandma made-up when my dad told her she could not do stockings. Stockings were from Santa. We continued this tradition until my brother, the youngest grandchild, graduated from high school. We continued this tradition for far too long. Each brown grocery bag of happiness contained seven gifts—seven unique gifts. My dad got things like an acorn-shaped candle, the gold coating already flaking off, while Mom received a pack of magenta paper plates, and I got a box of golf balls. I had never golfed.

And yet, there was always a sleeper. Every year one great gift snuck into a bag, surprising everyone, producing a chorus of “I’ll trade you!” Like the year I got the desk dictionary. There was no way I was going to trade. I loved my gift. The blue cover
appeared to be a leather substitute, and the outside edges of the pages were sprayed a shiny gold.

I finally find the book and open it, breathing in deeply. I let the mustiness completely fill my lungs. It smells just like my mom’s accordion case, which she opened each year at Christmastime when we were children. She dragged the wheezing instrument from the red velvet that lined the inside of the beaten brown case and slipped her arms through the leather straps until they rested on her shoulders. The accordion was a smooth wave of ivory, accented by shimmering gold. She would pull out loose pages of worn sheet music for *Up on the Housetop* and *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus*, which my sister and I laughingly changed to *I Saw Daddy Kissing Santa Claus*.

Though she only pulled out her accordion once a year, we always looked forward to it. We loved it.

When I was eleven my family got a new puppy and it whined, yelped, and fled from the room the first Christmas she heard my mother play. Although we ask every year, my mother has never pulled out the instrument since. It remains tucked away in a dark corner of the basement, the undisturbed case collecting years of dust. I think the dog’s distressing howls reminded my mother of the embarrassment she felt as an eight-year-old child, her classmates seeing and making fun of her as she dragged her giant case two blocks to her accordion lessons each day.
I think my aunt had an instrument, too, a flute, or something, though I never heard her play. She drove down and visited around Christmastime every year, but it was not to play music. It was to perm my mother’s hair. Late at night as we lay in our beds our noses would begin to burn as the pungent odor of perming chemicals wafted from the kitchen and down the hallway to our bedrooms. We would lie wide awake and complain about the smell, not believing the revitalization of tight curls was worth such a horrific stench.

Breathing in the delicious mustiness of the dictionary makes me wish I wasn’t living so far away from my mother. As a child when I did not know how to spell a word I would simply stop my pencil and lift my head from my worksheet as I called out to my mother in the next room. She always knew the correct spelling. She would speak slowly, giving me time to copy each letter with precise penmanship.

Away at school, I stop my pencil and find my dictionary instead of calling for my mother. I may be getting my information from a new location, but it was her years of spelling words for my worksheets and school reports and tutoring me at the kitchen table for math tests that helped me value the education that has taken me hours away.
Enter Nick. He was a frail third grader with unruly brown hair, the back cowlicking into a spiky spiral off-center to the right. His small frame was covered by transparently white skin, except for the purple bags below his hazel eyes. Head down, with his face to the floor, shoulders hunched like an old man suffering from too many years of hard labor, Nick wrung his hands as he stiffly paced back and forth across the classroom’s cornflower blue berber murmuring to himself in a tiny voice, “Ooh shit. Ooh shit. Ooh shit.”

I sat on a children’s chair, my knees higher than my waist, watching Nick’s fascination with an ink pen he had swiped from the top of the teacher’s desk. He knelt on one bony knee, the other pulled close to his down-turned chin. He held the center of the blue Bic between his thumb and finger. He balanced it there intently—cap side up, cap side down, cap side up—as I watched silently.

One of the other boys was squealing, in what sounded like delight, as he lay on his back on a red gymnasium mat. His long legs stretched so his feet touched his head. Another boy was playing with the boom box buttons. Yet another student was slamming
the keys of the computer trying to get it to turn on, and our fifth and final child was screaming in the hallway as Paula, one of the other aides, attempted to wrestle him up off of the floor, repeating loudly, “Time to stand up. Put backpack in locker. Neil, time to stand up. Neil, you need to stand up.”

Watching Paula struggle with her charge made me feel relief that Nick could occupy himself so quietly. I believed that my student was going to be very easy to handle. I knew I shouldn’t have favorites, but I was liking this little guy the best already.

The walls of the classroom were completely bare. The regular school year teacher had removed and hidden all her belongings; large sheets of purple butcher-block paper had been masking taped over the bookcase and under-counter shelving. The desks had been stacked in the back corner, one level standing on the floor and the second upside down on top—a mass of legs pointing straight up into the air. A pile of garage sale and thrift store toys our teacher bought for the kids to play with were in the opposite back corner. A large polar bear carnival prize leaned stiffly against the wall. A twenty-piece Snow White puzzle, a green army truck, Connect Four in its original but flattened box, and several plastic Happy Meal toys filled the tupperware bin next to the bear.

A bank of grey carpet-covered cubicles lined one wall of the classroom. The cubes held aides working one-on-one across desks from the children to prevent distractions. I opened the black three-inch binder containing Nick’s curriculum. My goal was to read
the poorly photocopied, illegibly written directions, figure out what I was supposed to be doing, and then work with Nick on meeting his “scholastic goals.” No one ever addressed why the ability to match two pictures of pajamas or pigs was an educational priority. I was never told why it would be helpful for Nick to distinguish a yield sign from the other pictures of street signs in a stack. He was significantly disabled. I did not think he could safely walk down the street by himself, let alone drive a car someday. I was completely on my own.

I had no experience, no children, no training, nothing that could possibly help me in this situation: I was expected to control this student, but I didn’t find it to be a simple task. The only guidance I received was during a two-hour training session the day before summer school started. The new aides crowded into a classroom on the upper floor of the local high school and were given an eight-page packet of photocopied power-point slides. We watched a 30-minute film called “Blood-Born Pathogens,” which taught me to avoid ever letting any part of my body come in contact with anyone or anything for any reason ever. I had to be careful whether I was cleaning up spit, slobber, snot, blood, feces, or urine. But no one shared tips on how to prevent the messes.

Nick was considered nonverbal. I was told as long as I spoke at a young enough level he could understand me, but I must also consider his latency period. I had been instructed to give him up to six seconds to comprehend and react to what I asked. Along with being
autistic, Nick was also echolalic. He had the ability to immediately repeat back what someone had just said to him, or repeat something that he had heard weeks prior. They told me he had no idea what he was saying, and it would not make sense to him or me.

I often thought he knew more than the educators gave him credit for. Some mornings Nick would shuffle into the classroom and already be anxious and worked up. No one knew why; he just had borderline-about-to-cry bad days on an almost weekly basis. He would stiffly pace in one area of the room until someone tried to come near or comfort him. Then he would just scuttle away and continue pacing. I was told an autistic child's response to distress is “fight or flight.” The child would either react by kicking and clawing at me, or would run away. Nick always chose to flee.

On one of those pacing days Nick was visibly upset. His face was pink and tears threatened to fall—clinging to his thick bottom lashes. I slowly moved a few steps closer, still keeping a distance, and heard him whimper to himself, “Nick is a fuckup.”

I was told Nick only repeated what he heard. It was bad enough those words were ever spoken about this or any child, but even worse, those words had been said in front of him. The other aides told me the connection between his words and actions was merely a coincidence, but I believed I had found the reason he was so upset that day. I was only part-time help, and not qualified to make a diagnosis of a child I had just met with a disability I did not understand. But the sorrow in that boy’s cry—I felt he knew exactly what had been said.
Five of the desks with their matching blue chairs had been set up in two rows that faced another desk with a small boom box we used to calm the children and a tall book called *Purple*. The desks were aligned for snack time. The kids brought in insulated lunch bags with Scooby Doo or Old Navy printed on the fronts, each filled with combinations of drink boxes, chips, cookies, snack cakes, fruit snacks, fruit roll-ups, rice krispies treats, and popcorn. The boys pulled up their chairs and unzipped their bags for snack time. The first day of school Nick was sent with a party-sized bag of nacho-flavored Doritos and nothing more. The big bag was to last until the end of the summer session.

In order to communicate his feelings, Nick used a book that had pictographic representations of the words it was believed he could use. It was a binder lined with rows of black velcro. All of the children had a binder uniquely tailored to their determined vocabulary. Nick was the only boy who did not take his with him to use at home.

Laminated icons with pictures and the words they represented were stuck to the strips. Nick had basic clipart pictures to represent *yes*, *no*, *nap*, *park*, *gym*, *bathroom*, and *wash hands*. He could ask for graham crackers, goldfish, juice boxes, cookies, or chips, though we were not equipped to fulfill most of those requests. Along the bottom of the book’s cover a larger index card was velcroed. I was supposed to make Nick place *I want* and *chips* onto the index card, and hand it to me. Instead, I repeatedly placed *I want* and
chips onto the card, and pointed at each one as I asked, “I want chips? Nick, Do you want chips?” He often did not respond. I resorted to just putting a chip on the desk in front of him. He wouldn’t touch it. I pushed it closer to him, but he simply sat with his arms crossed over his chest. I tried to hand it to him, but he shoved it away and reached for the ink pen that was lying on the corner of his desk. All he ever wanted to do was balance that pen.

Nick refused to drink the juice box we set in front of him each day. He played with the juice box, squeezing the little pouch until red juice squirted out of the straw like a geyser, but he never drank one drop. I was told it was necessary to take Nick to the bathroom every fifteen minutes, but I was skeptical at first; he never ate or drank. I quickly learned to heed the advice.

I cleaned up more urine in the four hours a day, four days a week the six weeks of that summer than I ever imagined could be possible. Nick’s mother, just like all of the other kids’ parents, sent an extra pair of shorts and underwear for her child. She knew to send two of each and a change of socks.

I didn’t know how much assistance I was to offer the kids while escorting them to the bathroom. I didn’t know if I was even supposed to go into the little boys’ bathroom. I didn’t want to be accused of being inappropriate if I was supposed to wait outside the door. What about the other little boys who may need to use the washroom while I was
When I asked the teacher, I was told each child was different and obviously needed a different level of help, and of course I was to go into the bathroom because I was a professional and that was my job.

During the third week of school I ushered Nick into the bathroom before heading to the gym. As always, he did not want to go, and used all of his might to attempt to push past me and out of the small boys’ washroom. I cornered him in the larger handicapped stall and latched the metal door behind us. I was tired of pulling out rubber gloves, baby wipes, and a change of clothes everyday. I wanted him to sit on the toilet.

“Nick, you need to pull down pants.”

“No!” he giggled as he pushed me away.

“Nick, you need to sit down.” I tugged on the bottom of his shorts lightly to reinforce what I wanted him to do. Nick pulled away, put both hands over his mouth and began giggling. I tried to drag him out of the corner and over to the toilet as he began to pee—it soaked through his shorts, traveled down his legs, saturated his socks, rolled off his old sneakers and onto the grey tiled floor. Nick giggled as I stood over him.

Nick was having so many “accidents” per day, and only when I was working with him, that I was beginning to doubt they were really accidents at all. I was fed up. What was I doing wrong that I could not get this child to use the toilet, even when he was standing next to it? No one else seemed to have this problem.
I looked right at him and said seriously, as I had seen the other aides do before, “Nick, no. That is not funny. I am mad,” as I gave him the sign language symbol for mad. He quizzically looked at me, and after the six seconds, I repeated the sign while saying rather harshly, “I am mad.” Giggles burst from his small mouth.

“I am mad! I am mad!” he repeated back to me through his fits of giggling.

This time I did not swap his royal blue elastic waisted shorts with the matching pair in his backpack. I pulled out the emergency pair—tight, hot pink shorts with rainbow squiggles on the sides. Even though the other kids were probably all oblivious, it made me feel better to think he was suffering embarrassment. You want to wet yourself? You think it is funny? I thought to myself. Then you get to wear these. How funny are you now?

It was four weeks into the summer session, and once again time for individual work. We headed into the cube, and Nick matched pictures of clothes. He looked bored as he placed the laminated socks icon onto the socks pictured on the laminated sheet. He matched the pants and pajamas and sweaters and shirts and coats. As I pulled out the next sheet of matching animals, Nick shoved his book of communication icons onto the floor.

“Nick, pick up book.” He just folded his arms across his chest and scowled at the wall.
“Nick, you need to pick up.” He pushed the desk hard—it teetered on two legs before I stopped it from toppling onto me.

“No. That is not nice.” Nick pushed away from the desk again, this time flinging himself onto the floor. We both knelt on the carpet inside the cube. I placed his book in front of him.

“Nick, do you want to work?” I pointed to the yes icon and then to the no icon. Instead of answering, Nick began to violently rip all of the icons from their velcro. He strewed them all over the floor, and began peeling the lamination from one of them.

“Nick, you need to pick up.”

“Do you want to switch kids?” one of the aides asked, peeking over the top of the cube’s wall. Normally I would have been grateful for the offer, but that day I was determined to not let him get the better of me. That time I did not want anyone’s help. I was not going to just walk away and let someone else deal with the problem. I wanted to get through to him. I needed to break the invisible but vast boundary that stood between us.

“No, I have it under control. But thank you.” I did not have it under control. I never had it under control. But I so wanted to. I spoke more firmly than I had before. Neither of us was going to leave the floor of that cubicle until I could get him to pick up his mess. Every time Nick picked up a handful of icons and threw the little squares of paper into the air, I pushed them back in front of him like. “No. You need to pick up.”
They fluttered in the air, but I was persistent. I raked smiley faces and toilets and chips all together in front of us. “Pick up.” I repeated it over and over. “No. Nick, pick up.”

He pouted and stomped his shabby sneakers, but he began to pick the icons up. One by one he slammed them back onto the book with a fuming scowl. “Good job, Nick. Very good.” I praised him, just as we always did when the kids accomplished something. I was proud of him for finally listening to my instructions, even though he did not want to. But I was also proud of myself. I had finally accomplished something, too.

The last two weeks of school ran more smoothly. Nick listened to me most of the time. Not only did he finally recognize me as an authority figure, but he also wanted to be around me. When we walked to gym or the playground or the bathroom, he always wanted to hold my hand. It did not happen instantly; frustration filled days dominated the summer.

Every day we would head through the gymnasium doors and out to the playground for a half hour. There was a plastic twirly slide, a climbing wall, monkey bars, and swings, all situated on a large squared-off section of plush woodchips. Nick was a runner, but fortunately he was not fast enough to make it to the parking lot or the street beyond that before I could catch up. His direction of choice was across the blacktop back toward the school.

Nick darted. I chased. Every day. I feared he would seriously hurt himself.
One second he was balancing on the wooden ledge separating the grass from the woodchips, and the next he was running—head down, legs spread apart, toes pointed out, arms flailing like an anxious Olive Oyl.

When I caught up Nick was standing next to the air conditioning unit behind the gym. He looked at the spinning machinery with fascination. He was drawn to it—the impressive speed and massive sound of moving parts—without realizing its dangers. I knew it would never slow down or stop for this curious boy who was reaching out his hand.

I placed my hand gently on the back of his white t-shirt to direct him towards the safety of the park.

“No. Too far. We have to stay at the park.” Nick pulled away and giggled, one hand pressed to his mouth, the other hand grasping the first tightly, his knuckles turning white. I guided him forward while repeating, “No. Too far. We can’t play over here.”

I ushered Nick across the blacktop, but he dodged out of my reach and ran back between the dumpsters, giggling as he headed straight to the roaring cooling unit. He looked me in the eye and laughed as I repeated, “No Nick. We have to stay at the park.”

We were almost to safety when he tried to dart again. I hated looking like an incompetent fool in front of the other teachers who were outside with their classes. My arm snatched a handful of t-shirt directly in the center of his back. It pulled tightly
across his chest and tummy, but he could not break loose. He eventually relaxed his efforts, and we returned to the park again.

Running away at the park was a game. A game I dealt with every day. Nick wanted the attention. He wanted to be chased. As the summer went on, Nick would begin to shuffle towards the blacktop, keeping his eyes focused on me. I pretended I did not see him, but I could only do that for so long. I did not want him to get hurt. The moment I started for him, he ran. I had to go and get him, and every time he just smiled a baby-toothed grin up at me as we walked back to the park again.

Eventually Nick no longer ran from me on the playground. He would begin to half-heartedly walk away farther than he should, but from where I was standing I called, “No, Nick, too far, come back,” as I smiled at him and gave a full-arm wave for him to come on back. Nick would look at me for a second or two, and then walk towards the playground, still playing with his Bic pen. He no longer felt the need to test his limits. He no longer tested me.

The last day of summer school was difficult for Nick. The staff spent the day cleaning their classrooms as the children chose what they wanted to do. It was a free day. Toys were straightened, and the desks were wiped down and stacked back into the corner. I tried to cheer Nick up by giving him his pen, but he ripped it from my hand and threw it across the room, screaming “No!” He began whimpering—his face turning
deep pink as tears rolled down his face. He cried most of the morning, only stopping when he was allowed to sit on my lap. He curled up on my lap and sucked his thumb as I slowly rocked the teacher chair from side to side.

At the end of the last day of summer school I helped Nick onto his bus. He sat in his seat and I buckled him in. I squatted down in the aisle next to him so we were eye to eye.

"Bye, Nick," I said as I waved my hand side to side in front of him.

"Bye, Nick," he repeated as he looked into his lap.

"No, say 'bye, Miss Jenny."

"Bye, Miss Jenny."

After the children were all escorted onto busses or picked up by parents, the staff members met for an end of summer celebration lunch at a local restaurant. I'm not exactly sure where they ate. I didn't go.

On the drive home, I looked out the window at the developing subdivisions and the flourishing cornfields, blending together seamlessly as though they had always co-existed. I watched the street signs race past in a blur of symbol and color. I thought about Nick, and how I would probably never see him again. I doubted he would remember me even if I did. I would never know if I'd had any lasting impact on his life, and I was okay with that. But I wished I could communicate to him how much of an
impact he’d had on mine. I would never forget Nick and the pleasure he got from his blue Bic pen.
I visited my sister, Michelle, at her new apartment with my arms wrapped around a small potted plant. I was home from college for the summer and toured her new home for the first time, stopping as she pointed out with pride the size of her round bathtub and walk-in closet. The closet was almost as large as my dorm room, and lined with evenly spaced plastic-coated shelving. Clothes hung together by season on matching plastic hangers, and shoes were neatly paired and lined on shelves by color and style.

Floor to ceiling cubbies and clear plastic bins organized socks and nylons, gift bags, Christmas decorations, notebooks, markers and crayons. I was certain that alphabetically labeled tan folders hung neatly inside the metal filing cabinet that sat just inside the closet door. I thought of myself as being organized, but I had learned it from Michelle, the master.

As I walked past her dresser I looked at the framed pictures set up in a planned randomness. I picked up a small silver frame with a picture of Michelle and Tracy down on one knee beside each other in their white pants and matching Blue Jay t-shirts, right hands tucked inside their softball mitts. Sweaty, disheveled hair was plastered to their
foreheads underneath their oversized, foam baseball caps, and tired smiles were spread across their faces.

“Can you believe they took team pictures after the first game?” Michelle said as she walked up behind me.

“That’s the Rec Center for you,” I said as I set the frame back down. I picked up one of the four of us children posed with our great grandmother in front of a wooden railing.

We visited our great grandmother one summer at her California home when we were young. We were used to grassy backyards separated by chainlink fences—full of hidden earthworms and roly polies we would collect from under rocks. But in California the backyards were patches of sand and tiny rocks. Our great grandmother’s yard was separated from her neighbors’ by grey cinderblock walls. Hidden in the yard’s little tufts of weeds and grass were smooth snail shells, which Michelle, Tracy, Eric and I spent one afternoon digging out and collecting. Michelle led the search, having a knack for locating the shells, as I followed right behind her with an overturned frisbee to carry them in.

When it was time to stop, we sat down and ate our fried chicken dinner at the splintered grey picnic table. While we were busy tearing crispy fried skin from our chicken, our grandma took our plastic frisbee and filled it with cold water from the spigot next to the patio door. Small, yellow snails began to emerge from their
believed to be vacant) shells. Michelle and Grandma let the slimy creatures slowly crawl on their arms as I watched with a blend of curiosity and disgust. The little backyard snails were the most exotic animals I had seen up close. I was in awe that they let these snails crawl on their skin, but this was one thing I was not going to try, even if Michelle was doing it. Michelle was the big sister I looked up to for advice, the one who taught me how to be cool.

I looked at Michelle's photos of the three of us girls in the bedroom we used to share and wondered how we ever managed in such a cramped space. We fought, but my mother never put up with our bickering. My sisters and I were sometimes sent to timeout where we could have no toys or tvs to distract time into going faster. We were not simply sent to the magenta carpeted bedroom the three of us shared, filled with Barbies and coloring books, but were required to sit on our beds. In silence. We only had the pink walls, our bedding, and each other's dirty looks to keep us company.

On one particular day Michelle began unmaking her bed—ripping off the baby blue and pink heart comforter, a yellow afghan our grandmother had made for her, and the pastel top sheet, piling them near the footboard of her bed—as Tracy and I nervously watched from our bunk beds. She laid the corner of the sheet on the bed and stretched it out onto the carpet as far as it would go. She stepped off her bed and onto her extended sheet, dragging her afghan and comforter with her. She overlapped the edge of the afghan and then the comforter, stretching each one as far as it could reach.
“Michelle, get back on your bed,” I begged her as I watched the bedroom door, expecting our mother to come in any moment. 

“What if Mom finds out?” Tracy asked her. 

Michelle just looked at us and said with a big-sister sneer, “As long as I stay on the blankets that are touching the bed, I’m technically still on it.” 

I stopped whining. 

I wandered into the kitchen of Michelle’s apartment where she stood pouring a can of Pepsi into a glass filled with ice, her other hand resting on the hip of her khaki shorts. I asked her if she remembered the blanket trick. 

“What are you talking about? I don’t think that ever happened,” she said. 

“Really?” 

“Are you sure it was me? Maybe it was Tracy?” 

“No, it was you. I remember being on the bottom bunk under her when you did it.” I knew I remembered correctly, but Michelle always had an assertiveness that made me second-guess myself. As I left Michelle’s apartment that afternoon I made a mental note to double-check my memory with Tracy.
Butterball

I pushed my chair back from what was left of the Thanksgiving feast that covered the family table set for nine and slouched down, arching my back and stretching my belly underneath my pink sweater until I looked as though I was with child, rubbing the pudge in slow, gentle circles. “I ate way too much. Now I’ll have to fast for a week to fit back into my work slacks.”

“You’re not a fat girl anymore, Jenny,” my sister said across the table.

“Thanks a lot, Tracy.”

“You know what I mean—it’s a compliment. You don’t want to become one of those whiny skinny girls you always hated, saying they’re too fat to squeeze into a size two.”

“I’m a long way from wearing a two.” I had to wonder—would she have thought of me as thin if I hadn’t been so heavy before? Was I now only skinny by comparison? I scoffed, but I did know what she meant; I appreciated her compliment, but I couldn’t see what she saw. When I saw myself in the mirror, even though it had been a year since I had lost all of my college weight, I was still a fat girl. I didn’t see smooth curves where 35 additional pounds used to be piled, insulating my body and stretching my skin, squeezing
out over the top of my waistband and out from under the band of my bra, but instead saw
the fifty places that the extra LBs still remained, the fifty places I knew I needed to
improve.

And yet I ate. I gorged myself at the feast, and then enjoyed a large slice of apple
pie smothered in cool whip a few hours later. I even had a huge lunch of leftovers the
day after the feast, and followed that up with a generous helping of pumpkin pie.

I drove the five hours back to my apartment in Iowa and spent the night with my
new man. His warm shoulder cradled my head as he slept, his lungs expanding and his
chest rising with each deep breath. But I lay awake counting the blue stripes of the sheet
covering our naked bodies and wondered if he had noticed the three new pounds. I
worried that it might matter. I decided I’d better go to the gym the next day, just to be
safe.

I don’t know of any particular moment that I began to worry about my weight, it
was an issue for as long as I can remember. I was fussy about how I looked to others as
early as kindergarten.

I refused to wear shorts that stopped short of my knee caps, which were difficult
for my mother to find, me being too embarrassed to allow those pudgy thighs to be seen
by others. Somehow, I hoped, brightly patterned cotton would disguise my size. I didn’t
want to have to see my pasty-white legs spreading out into heaps of flesh as I sat in my
plastic blue chair at school, sticking to it as I stood up. I sat disgusted as I looked down at
my lap, knowing what was lurking underneath the purple and green swirling zigzags. I always felt like I was bigger than the other girls, but I also hoped they didn’t notice.

The only thing worse than seeing the spreading expanse of my own thighs was seeing them shake violently as they were pressed against the car’s backseat. Each whir of the motor sent the free flesh shimmying, bumps and turns sent ripples across my soft legs. I sat with my hands pressed against the tops of my thighs, attempting to conceal the wobbling with my pudgy fingers, praying that my sisters and brother didn’t notice, and swearing to never wear shorts again. In my teen years it was cool among my friends to wear our wide-leg jeans in the summer, and so years passed without me ever baring my legs.

I slowly climbed out from under the sheet, careful not to disturb my boyfriend’s sleep. I pulled on my terrycloth robe and padded out to the living room. I looked at a picture on my bookshelf of my siblings and me hugging a giant penguin wearing a rainbow scarf at Sea World in the middle of August when I was about seven. In it I’m standing next to Tracy, her turquoise shorts revealing her thin, nine-year-old legs—appearing no bigger at the thigh than at the calf. Between her and the man in the penguin suit is me—canvas sneakers, cotton socks fashionably rolled, and black spandex capri-pants. An inconspicuously long t-shirt covers my large bottom, but my thighs protrude uncontested from underneath the tight, thin material of my shiny pants.
Did I really believe that this made me appear thinner? As long as my legs were covered and I didn’t have to see them? I rarely wore those pants, even though they (along with bike shorts) were the epitome of fashion and I just had to have them. I knew I felt too heavy when I put them on. I wore them on vacation just as other tourists proudly wore loud Hawaiian shirts and hats with animal ears. Somehow being halfway across the country in a state full of strangers had made me forget my embarrassment for a brief moment, made me forget I was fat.

I headed into the bathroom for a glass of water and stood before my full length mirror and turned to the side, pinching together the fat above my hip. I reached higher and squeezed a patch of back fat. I wondered how many more pounds I would need to drop before I would be satisfied.

What was it that I was really seeking? I wanted to be happy. I wanted to be satisfied with who I was and embrace it. I wanted to allow myself to stop wondering what others were thinking when they embraced me. Lifting the blanket slightly, I slid back into bed next to my boyfriend. He stirred and put his arm around me, and I let him pull me closer against his warm skin until we lay like spoons. I listened to his breathing, mine slowing to match, and quickly fell asleep.
I was never one to accept change easily. I used the same baseball catcher’s mitt for seven seasons before I would even listen to my father’s approaches about getting a new one. I couldn’t fathom changing my glove. I knew it would take years to relearn what I had come to know, and feel. This leather had become an extension of my body, and I didn’t want a new glove anymore than I would have wanted a replacement hand. My organized softball career was going to come to an end in the near future, and I could see no reason to change so late in the game. My father even bought a softball glove for me to try. He offered to use it during pitching practice to break it in for me.

But I was stubborn. I enjoyed sliding my hand into the soft, worn leather. It had formed to my hand, and my fingers slid easily into their home grooves and loops. I felt confident when my left hand was securely inside. I didn’t need to watch the ball all the way into my glove anymore. I could feel it.

My father gave up on convincing me of the superiority of the new softball mitt. He probably wished I would try it at least once, especially since it wasn’t cheap, but he remained silent on the subject.
After that, the piece of equipment I fought my father on was “knee savers.” They were black wedges of firm foam that connected to the back of a catcher’s shin guards just below the calves. Instead of squatting, a catcher could lean her butt on these and rest between pitches. Maybe some other catchers, but not me. I made it clear I was completely against the idea.

“Real catchers don’t need to sit on a chair in between pitches.”

“The girls wear them in college.” I didn’t care what those girls did, and I made that clear

“I don’t need them.”

My dad went to SportsMart and bought the knee savers anyway. He brought them home one Sunday afternoon, excited to show what he had picked out just for me.

“Dad! I told you I don’t want stupid shin guard seats. I’m never going to wear them in a game. They’re bulky and for lazy people.” The excitement quickly drained from his face, his eyes betraying his disappointment.

“Well, you can try them out in practice and see how you like them.” I felt terrible. He’d gone shopping to get a gift for me, and I’d acted like an ungrateful brat.

I back pedaled. “No, really. I’ll try them out. I think they’ll just need some getting used to. It’ll be good to just wear them at practice a few times before I try them in a game.” I worked hard to pull my unappreciative foot out of my mouth. I felt awful
for disappointing him. “Thanks for getting these for me, Dad. I think they’ll just take some time.”

I did plan on trying them out at practice. I didn’t count on having to undo all of the elastic straps on the backs of my shin guards, though. It was confusing, and so I just said forget it. I tossed the pads back into my equipment bag and looked over to my dad as he was counting, figuring who was not at practice.

“We need to start warm-ups, so I’ll have to put these things on later when I have a couple hours to fart around with undoing all of my straps.” He seemed okay with that. I never did use the knee savers.

There was one piece of equipment my father successfully convinced me to try. A new catcher’s mask. For years I’d worn an older style—leather forehead and chin pads blocking all peripheral vision. I had no problem seeing, as long as it was directly in front of me.

I fought with my dad for a long time before I was willing to set aside my comfortable and familiar way of looking out at the game, and switch to the new style mask, which was similar to a hockey goalie’s. I couldn’t forget the excitement in my father’s eyes the last time he got me new equipment, and how it only took me a few seconds to completely crush his spirits. Whether I liked it or not, I was going to give the helmet a fair try.
The first time the smooth curve of plastic was snapped shut around my head, I nearly ripped my head from my neck as I popped up from my squat and tried to take off my mask like I always had before. This improved mask allowed peripheral vision, and so never had to be taken off. The very next play I forgot again, tugging on the chin and only succeeding in turning the mask cockeyed. It took some time, but once I got used to it I never wanted to go back. There was no loss of vision. I was quicker at assessing situations, and more confident in making decisions because I could see more than just what was directly ahead of me.

I found it hard to change so many things, and yet the change in helmet had been a successful one. I had said yes to a new way of seeing the game, and I was thrilled that I had. I stood in my new shiny, black plastic, with my eyes lifted up to the clear summer sky. I was ready to start.
The Garage

My dad replaced me. He simply put his ad on a website designed for softball teams, and found two young women. Yes, in order to continue playing the team needed to get a new catcher, and I hoped for my sister’s sake in particular that the additions would be good. Still, I didn’t fully realize what that meant until February when he, my coach, called me at my apartment in Iowa to tell me the great news. Two catchers. Both played in school at the college level.

_I_ had chosen to go away to Ames for graduate school. _I_ was the one who left the team. _I_ was the one who forced my dad to find a new player. And yet, the ache in my chest reminded me of my first boyfriend. My lungs felt restricted and I was fighting back tears. I felt like I had just been dumped by my father and an entire team of girls I had begun to think of as family.

I listened, only interjecting an occasional “uh-huh” or “oh yeah?” so he would know I was still on the line, but I knew I needed to get off the phone.

I found that I didn’t want to hear how good they were. I didn’t want to think about them playing in college while I chose to spend my time writing and getting
involved in the English department. I didn’t want to know their names, or where they were from. I didn’t want to hear about their experience or their equipment.

I had been replaced.

I had always been the catcher for our summer team, and now very quickly and easily somebody else, no, two somebodies, were filling my chalk-lined box behind the plate.

I had thought it would be easy to simply stop playing. I was in graduate school, I was teaching college classes to pay my way—it was just time for me to move on. It was time for me to start getting serious about my future. Softball was just a game.

Vacation plans always revolved around the schedule, or didn’t happen at all. For the first time since I was a young child I would be able to travel, to do something other than softball. I decided to take advantage and follow the passion that kept me from playing ball in college—writing. I signed up for a class that would journey out west to Wyoming.

Two weeks before the camping trip I went home for Mother’s Day to see my mom and to borrow my sister’s sleeping bag. I pulled my little blue Escort in on the far side of the driveway and entered through the garage. As I walked in to the cool shade I noticed my large blue equipment bag’s belly opened wide, its guts spilling out onto the garage’s oil-stained cement. I felt exposed. I felt like a little girl who had just had the pencil-scrawled pages of her diary read out loud in front of her family and the young boy she
loved. My metal cleats still caked with dirt from last season’s final game; white styrofoam cups that had been smashed in half underneath the weight of the gear, JENNY gouged into a side of each cup by a fingernail; a lime green hand towel still folded into fourths and stained with brown swipes of sweat. My extra pair of stirrup socks; a faded tube of cherry chapstick; crumpled sheets of dusty notebook paper listing other teams, jersey numbers, where they previously hit, and who to pitch around. The secret, unglamorous aspects of my game that no one saw had betrayed me while I was out of town.

It annoyed me that my sister had rummaged through my stuff to borrow the sliding pad that I wasn’t using. I set down my suitcase and checked for the essential pieces of gear. I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep that night until I was certain that those new girls hadn’t been adjusting the length of my straps and sliding my gear onto their collegiately toned, athletic bodies. One pair of shin guards—check. One chest protector—check. One new catcher’s mask—check. One glove—no.

I shoved cups and paper out of the way, dragging my fingernails through the dirt that had accumulated along the bottom of the bag. I shook the bag empty—trash and dust and extra softballs falling onto the floor of the garage. It wasn’t there. I looked on the wooden shelves built by my father, holding rows of labeled pickle buckets—indoor balls, pitching balls, and balls for batting practice. I stood on my tiptoes to peer on top of a stack of three soft bases and wooden homeplates for pitching practice.
I found it. There it was, lying folded in half next to the beaten metal tackle box we had turned into the team first aid kit. A cloud puffed up like a wheezing cough as I picked up my mitt. I gingerly fingered the frayed leather lace that had snapped, no longer connecting the pocket to the circular swoop of the thumb. I was almost certain my dad was the one who’d used it to catch for Tracy, and not the new girls who probably had mitts of their own. But it still bothered me. My mitt had been separated from the rest of the equipment and left in some random place, alone.

I trekked to Yellowstone Park with my class at the end of May. But even there, after a week of being surrounded by mountains and sapphire lakes, forests of tall, slim trees, glimpsing moose and a grizzly bear, I couldn’t stop thinking of where I would have been at that very moment if I had been back in Chicago—home.

I would’ve been on a dusty field with too many patches of crunchy gravel. I would have been squatting in my chalky box behind home plate, bordered to the north by miles of matching homes in neatly rowed subdivisions, and to the south by endless fields of corn. I couldn’t forget, even when I thought I had gotten what I wanted.

I waited for my turn at the outhouse and turned my back to the wind that gusted the dusty road into a swirl of powder brown. I saw the top layers of road pick up and begin blowing towards me and I instinctively turned my back, looking down at the wide, sturdy stance of my feet until the breeze calmed, and the dirt settled, just as I had
whenever the top layer of infield lifted into a funnel and headed towards me. On those
days I would blindly attempt to catch my sister’s attention before her hands separated, a
moment when she could no longer stop her pitching motion—hurling the ball at me and
my narrowed eyes.

As I stood waiting next to that outhouse, I reached into my pocket and turned a
small rock that I had found earlier that day over and over in my fingers. It had smooth
edges with a slight ridge to one side. A gastrolith that had seen the inside of a dinosaur
and had survived to tell its story. Or maybe it was just a river rock, smoothed and
polished by water. I thought about my sister and how she would turn the twelve-inch
neon yellow sphere over and over in her hand as I called the next pitch. She would
massage the ball into position, running her fingertips against the red-stitched ridge,
feeling instead of seeing the perfect placement.

Standing all alone in the middle of Wyoming, one hundred feet from the school
van, I realized that it wasn’t just how easily I’d been replaced that had been upsetting me.
I missed no longer being able to call myself a softball player. This was the first year that I
wouldn’t be playing softball since I was a five-year-old Bluejay, and I had been struggling
with that thought. But I recognized in my movement that it would always be a part of
who I was, whether I was on the summer team or not. I still moved and felt like a ball
player, and wherever I traveled I would see the softball field in the graveled mix of dust
and tiny rocks. It would be okay to move on, to grow and change, because if I looked, the ball player would always be there.