The Game

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O’Conner, get in and run for Thompson! I hear Coach Stomp yell as he makes toward the dugout from the third base coach’s box. I grab a helmet and slap Thompson five as we run past each other. I immediately begin thinking situation: one out, bottom of seven, down by one to a good Springfield team, Wally’s on third, I’m first running for Big Thom, and Jack’s at the plate. Stomp’s gotta be sending me, and I can tell Coach Wurtz at my side is also thinking the same thing. “Don’t get picked off, Rook,” he tells me. I gaze across the diamond to Stomp who has returned to the coach’s box there, but there’s no steal sign. The pitch is a ball, and I gaze once more. Again, there is no steal sign. My frustration’s mounting as the count grows. Now it’s 3 and 2, and I gaze one last time to Stomp who still doesn’t give me the sign. What the hell is Stomp thinking? The situation calls for me to be running. I’ve gotta stay out of the double play, and I’ve gotta be looking to score on a base rip. It’s the last inning for Christ’s sake, and this is no time for Stomp to forget his situations.

Dammit, I decide. Screw Stomp, I’m not about to lose this game because Stomp can’t coach. I’m off with the pitch, and I hear the solid ping of a line drive as Jack’s bat makes contact with the pitch. It’s a liner, all right, headed toward the leftfield gap. Well, there’s no slowing down now. I round second, and as I’m heading into third, Stomp is waving me home. I glance back after I make my way around third. I can see the ball’s already in the air. It’s a good throw, but it is a little up the line. Slide to the inside of the baseline, avoiding the tag, and as I look up through the cloud
of dust, I see the ump signal safe. That’s the ball game. I hop up, give my fist a little pump, and head toward the dugout to the cheers of the fans — almost entirely parents, siblings, and girlfriends of my teammates. I give Jack a point of my finger for the hit, and he points back as we enter the dugout, smiles glowing from our faces. “Way to run, Rook!” shouts Thom, and we enjoy our victory. Stomp’s calling my name. “O’Conner, what the hell made you take off with the pitch?”

“I thought there were two outs, Coach,” I answer. I can tell as he shakes his head that he doesn’t believe my lie, but I don’t give a damn.

As most of my teammates talk to their families, girlfriends, and other friends enjoying a day at the diamond, Jack and I pack up the bats, the helmets, the balls, everything a baseball team needs, and carry them into the school. As the youngest members of the varsity squad, this thrilling duty falls to us.

“Stomp never gave you the sign, did he, Rook?” asks Jack.
“No, he didn’t.”
“Sometimes I wonder how he turned this into a winning program as dense as that blunder could have been.”
“I’ve had similar thoughts.”
“What the hell possessed you to run, Rook? I mean, you’ll never play regularly pulling stunts like that one.”
“Hell, Jack, I wasn’t going to lose cause Stomp’s a chickenshit.”

We talk some more, about Wally’s clutch double, about walking Big Thom to face to Jack, about the majors, and after most of the other people have left, we’ve finished putting everything away. Jack asks if I want a ride home, that it wouldn’t be any trouble for his mom to drop me off. I tell him, no thanks, I feel like walking. I’m in no rush to get home, and as
long as the sun is still in the sky, I have a plausible claim for why I have not been home yet.

I enter my house, and immediately I hear Randy and Mom yelling about something, which means I pretty much only hear Randy. My mom is little more than a weak shell of a person after eighteen years of marriage to my father. I sneak to the bottom of the stairs from where I can hear my older brother yell at Mom. The word “dope” is quite clearly part of Randy’s verbal assault. So Mom found Randy’s stash and confronted him. That’s all I need to know, and I retreat to the basement.

I turn on the light and walk to the coffee table. In the middle sits a chessboard with all the chess pieces save one. I fetch the black rook, my good luck charm, from my baseball bag. Replacing the rook, I begin to play a game against myself, considering all the situations while remembering when I first found Randy’s dope. I told him it’d be nothing but trouble.

As I move the white bishop against the black rook, I hear my father open the door. Shit, Randy’s still going at it with Mom. That boy better shut up quick if he knows what’s good for him.

Of course, Randy doesn’t shut up. My father storms upstairs, and Randy yelling down my mother’s throat now becomes my father shouting at Randy. What’s the use? Dad will probably just take the dope and smoke it himself. Dad yells anyway, likes the sound of his voice booming down upon my mother, my brother, and me.

I try to forget my family upstairs, try to focus on the chessboard, try to wish myself into the game. I can’t bring myself to do it, though. Instead, I can see the scene upstairs; it’s almost a daily occurrence. My father is a big man, 225 or so, a mix of fat and muscle. He has loosened
his tie, and rolled up the sleeves of the dress shirt he wore to work. Sweat beads from his forehead, and more than likely, he has had at least one drink from the bottles he has in the house. It never takes Father long to start in on one of those bottles once he arrives home. Right now, though, he is yelling uselessly as he towers over Randy. Randy is sitting on my parents’ bed, trying as hard as he can to be as small and insignificant as possible. His head is bowed downward, glazed blue eyes closed so he won’t see a blow coming from Father, and thus, won’t flinch when it comes. He is already steeling himself to prevent any cry of pain. My mother has done what Randy is wanting to do; she has faded out of existence. Her dusty blond hair hangs over her once beautiful face which is now aged and weary from life with my father and the burden of two sons born too early. The only sign of her presence in the plush red chair in my parents’ room is the periodic glow that comes when she takes a drag of her cigarette.

My mind leaves the scene upstairs as I realize my mistake. I have been playing boldly with the black side, but I exposed that side too much. Checkmate for white, eight moves away. I make them mechanically, the regimentation of known moves feels reassuring as I play it out to the end.

“So how did the JV game go this morning, Rook?” asks Jack. It is the day after we came back from Springfield, and we’re sitting at the end of the dugout during the top of the second.

“Good. We won six to three,” I reply.

We stare at the plate as we watch Robbie Carter, the rightfielder and eighth man in the lineup, step up to bat.

“How did you hit?” asks Jack.

“Went three for four, double, homer, bunt single.”

“Bunt single?”
“We needed the runner,” I answer

Neither of us has much to do at this moment; Jack’s the cleanup hitter and my job is to keep pitch count for our team. So we sit, chew sunflower seeds, enjoy the game and its serenity in quiet at the end of the bench. Carter and our next hitter get out, though and along with an earlier out, the inning is over. Jack grabs his mitt and mask and hustles into the field.

He is the only reason this team is really good. The others would make a good team, but Jack is the only reason this team is on the verge of being great, the only reason they got to within a game of state last year. Damn, he is just going to be a junior this fall, one grade ahead of me, but he is leading us in about every offensive category while I just have splinters in my ass. I remember how the other parents bitched and moaned when he started playing last year, though. I heard the shit sitting in the stands from the parents, siblings, friends of the older players who he replaced. They had a field day when Jack made the last out of the season. That is partly the reason why I’m not playing this year, although, I’d almost certainly be the best outfielder on the team. I won’t play tonight; North Lee is just a small county school with a pushover team year in and out. I never see any playing time in the blowouts.

By now, we’ve set North Lee down in order. Jack runs to the end of the bench, tosses aside his mask, and takes off his chest protector. He is up fourth in the inning, and we both figure he’ll make it to the plate.

“How about the start of the playoffs, Rook?” asks Jack. This is the last regular season game, and our next game is the start of the single elimination postseason. We have a great chance to make state, and a good chance for a state championship. But Jack is thinking the same damn thing I am.
“Second round against Springfield,” I say.
“It’ll be a doozy, won’t it?”
“That it will, Jack. That it will.”

I walk home slowly after the bus ride back from North Lee. Dad will be home by now, I figure. An insurance salesman, my father seems to be at work late more frequently than most insurance people are. But then again, he seems to be very successful doing it; something that struck me as odd when I consider the amount of booze he consumes. As I enter the door, I see my father, not surprisingly, pouring himself a drink in the kitchen.

“How did the game go?” he asks gruffly.
“We killed them,” I answer.

“Did you play?” he asks; I shake my head no. “Better luck next time, then, Eric.” He heads up to my parents’ room. As he is leaving, I see my father as an old man. He is not yet forty, but his hair is almost entirely grey. He is a big man, a strong man, but in the dusk light creeping through the kitchen window, he appears as nothing more than an old man with his drink.

I set my baseball gear down and walk out onto the porch. My mother is sitting on a lawn chair there, doing her best to enjoy a cigarette and the end of a summer eve. She looks at me through her loving brown eyes. She was nineteen when she had Randy, had to quit college, married my father. Now, she is a part-time secretary for Dad’s insurance business, working Tuesdays and Thursdays. Still she only makes a few of the baseball games.

“Hello, Eric,” she says. “Sorry I couldn’t make the game.”
“That’s all right. You didn’t miss much.”

“You guys won?” I nod yes. “Did you play?” This time I shake
no. “That’s too bad. We all know you should be starting.” I wonder about this. At least last year, the bitching would stop around Jack’s parents. The bitching would be worse if I played; Dad hasn’t come to a game in two years, and Mom is “lucky” to make five games a year.

“Mom,” I say. “The playoffs start next week. We should play Springfield next Thursday. It’ll be a great game.”

“I’ll try and make it,” she says.

She should almost certainly be off work by the time the game starts; there is no good reason I can think of why she couldn’t make it. “How about Dad?” I ask.

“I’ll let him know you’d like it if he went.”

With that I head downstairs to the chess game I’ve been playing. I take off the checker I used to mark the spot, and I replace it with the black rook freshly snatched from my bag. After I’ve made a couple moves, Randy enters the room. The eighteen-year-old will be a senior in the fall, but in spite of his troublemaking, he has pretty good grades. “If he would only be more disciplined” was the phrase teachers usually use.

I see no visible wounds from his argument last night. At least Dad didn’t hit him. Randy’s eyes are cold and menacing, though, and I can tell he is still upset about the argument.

“You told Mom about the dope,” he says.

“I did not,” I answer. I’m faster than Randy, but he’s still bigger. Down here, there is nowhere to run, and I prepare myself for what I know is coming.

“Don’t ever turn on me again, Eric!” he says, and as soon as my name escapes Randy’s lips, his fist crashes into me. The blow splits my lip and sends me sprawling backward onto the coffee table. My fall scatters the chess pieces over the floor. I rise, ignoring the blood trickling from my
lip, down the chin, and onto the coffee table. I stare at Randy, but Randy’s anger has been released so he turns and walks away.

It is the bottom of the sixth inning against Springfield, the second round of the playoffs. The winner of this game will be favored to go to state. By now, the swelling around my lip has gone down, but I’m so nervous that I might bite the scab off. We are down two to one with one already out. The Springfield pitcher has thrown a hell of a game, but now he is tired and our two best hitters, Big Thom and Jack, are due up. Thom rips the first pitch he sees into the hole between second and third base. The shortstop demonstrates great range to reach the ball, and due to Thom’s bulk and lack of speed, the shortstop is able to throw him out at first for the second out. Jack steps to the plate. He takes a fastball for strike one and then lets a curve drop low for ball one. The third pitch Jack sends screaming up the middle, right at the pitcher who out of reflex sticks his glove in the air and snags the liner for the third out.

My nerves build as my teammates take the field for the top of the seventh. I can barely bring myself to watch, but I have to count pitches. Thankfully, it is a quick inning — one, two, three — and before I’m fully prepared, we have our last crack, three outs to score a run and tie the game.

Coach Stomp says little before he runs out to the third base coach’s box, only “let’s get one across.” Henry, our leftfielder, leads off the inning. He swings at the first pitch, a fastball, and sends a single into leftfield. It’s now decision time for Stomp; does he try and steal, does he bunt, or does he let our batter Eli hit. I lean forward in my seat on the bench to see the sign; it calls for the bunt. So Stomp plays it safe and Eli lays down the bunt on the first pitch, a fastball. So now we have a runner
in scoring position and two shots to drive Henry.

To my surprise, Stomp calls timeout and is running over to the

I stand up, a little unsure of what to do. Jack, sitting next to me,
leans over and says, “Go gettem, Rook.” I nod, walk to the end of the
dugout, snatch a helmet, and select a bat. I step into the on-deck circle,
take a practice swing to loosen my muscles. Nerves are filling my body up,
threatening to choke me, and I find myself searching the stands, although
I already know — the same as when I searched before the game started —
my parents aren’t here. “Pull it together,” some part of my mind shouts at
me. “Think situation.” My heart rate slows to a more controlled beat; my
breath deepens and seems to focus. Situation, exactly. Think situation, I
know what to do. Springfield’s pitcher is tired, and ... and ... and what?
“And he has come after each hitter with a first pitch fastball of the last two
innings,” I whisper to myself.

Right then, our batter strikes out. Two down now. All on my
shoulders. Bring it on. I know what to do. I stroll to the plate and dig into
the left-handed batter’s box. There it is, first pitch fastball. I swing, and I
send a screamer into right centerfield. I spring toward first, thinking at
least a double all the way. As I close in on first base, I see the centerfielder
had a great break on the ball and is closing fast. When I start to round the
bag, I see Springfield’s centerfielder dive, I see the catch made, and I see
the ump signal out. That is all I see as I collapse onto the bag. I know I
will regret it later, but it doesn’t seem to matter now, in this moment. So I
begin to cry and to cry and to cry. ✦