

The Game

by Ryan Kauffman

The sun was already setting when I arrived. A pinkish hue filled the horizon and cascaded over the baseball field. My son, Jeremy, was the starting right fielder for the Hanlon County Knights. I hadn't been to one of his games in two months, just before the divorce was final, but Liz had called me several times to rub in the fact that her son was one of the best players on the team. She never called him our son. But that wasn't the reason I'd missed his games. Despite her recent nastiness, which wasn't all together unwarranted, I still loved Liz.

The game, which was the regional championship, matched my son's team against the Scott County Bulldogs. If they would have played the game on paper, a knight beats a bulldog every time. But, as any sports fan knows, games aren't decided by mascots.

Friends and families packed the stands along both the first and third base sides. There would be a good chance of running into Liz if I sat on the first base side, so I sat with the fans from the other team along the third base side to avoid a confrontation. I didn't think I could handle the sight of Liz with another man and I knew she already had a boyfriend. Her last call had included that information too. I couldn't blame her for her apprehension. The divorce, after all, had been my fault.

I made it through most of the game without making a sound, as if I was a mouse being stalked by an owl. It was an exciting game, though. One team would get the advantage only to have the other take it right back. The game reminded me of a teeter-totter that Jeremy had played on when he was in elementary school. In the last inning, and the tying run on third, Jeremy walked up to the plate and started digging his right foot into the batter's box.

The pitcher threw the first pitch for a strike, causing a pair of middle-aged women to my left to cheer. They must have been related to the boy pitching. Jeremy swung at the second pitch, hitting a hard line drive foul down the first base line. Jeremy stepped out of the box and looked down the third base line to his coach.

"You can do it, Jeremy," I yelled. The words came out without a single thought. I didn't mean to give away my position, but the commotion from the people around me gave me no choice but to shout.

His head turned away from the direction of his third base coach to find me in the crowd. A slight grin forced its way onto his face when he saw me. In that moment, seeing him grinning with a seeming twinkle in his eyes, I realized that he was more Liz's son than mine. He didn't get one of his good

features from me. After a long second he looked back to his coach and dug his right foot back into the batter's box.

The pitcher looked to the catcher for the sign, nodded, and started his delivery. Time slowed, as if the adrenaline caused by my anticipation made my heart beat so fast that the world actually stopped rotating for a moment. I saw the ball spinning as it made its way toward the plate. Everyone around me seemed silent, or I maybe I just wasn't paying attention. Jeremy took a step and started his swing. Time sped back up when he stopped the swing and quickly took a step back from the plate.

"Strike 3, batter's out!" The umpire thrust his right fist downward with enthusiasm. The people around me stood, clapping and cheering for the Scott County Bulldogs victory. At first, I saw Jeremy drop and shake his head, as in disbelief. I too was in disbelief. From my angle it looked like Jeremy had checked his swing in time. I closed my eyes and took a breath. When I opened them, the disbelief grew.

"Are you blind?" Jeremy was in the umpire's face. "That pitch was six inches outside!"

"Your swing broke the plane," the umpire said. Jeremy's face was flushed. I hoped that he would leave the argument at that, but then Jeremy started speaking in a way that I'd never heard him, a way I never wanted to hear.

"That's a crock of shit, ump! You stupid, blind, pudgy mother fucker! How the fuck do they let you umpire games?" His voice was screechy with anger. Everyone around me stopped moving and turned their heads to watch the screaming young man, my son. By the time I could move, still shocked at the actions of Jeremy, the coach had grabbed him and escorted him away from the field. I wanted to talk to him, to ask him what that was all about. A knot-like feeling in my gut told me that I was responsible for the outburst.

I stood in the same place long enough for the stands around me to clear and to give Liz time to leave without seeing me. My plan, as brilliant as I thought it was, backfired. The voice came from behind me.

"Tom?" I closed my eyes and shook my head. Seeing her was the last thing I wanted to do. I opened my eyes and turned to see Liz standing next to a man who appeared to be ready to burst out of his shirt, veins and muscles pumped like he'd just stuck himself with a syringe full of steroids. "So nice of you to finally come to one of your son's games." If she was calling him my son it was obvious that she wasn't pleased with how he'd acted.

"Yeah," I stalled, trying to find the right thing to say. "Better late than never." That wasn't exactly what I meant to say, but how often do we get to indulge ourselves in that moment? It did, however,

accomplish the goal of giving pause to her next onslaught of sly comments. Her hair was still the long, flowing red that I fell in love with so many years prior. She released a deep breath and shot me a mischievous smile.

“This is Eric,” she said, turning just enough so I could see her hand playing on his ripped chest. I faked a smile.

“Hi, Eric,” I said, stretching my arm out for a handshake. His eyes had the look of a lost child, darting side to side as if a sign in the distance would tell him what to do next. He reached out and took my hand.

“Uh,” he said, “hell of a game.” I nodded in agreement. For being such a strong looking man, his handshake was unexpectedly weak. It was the kind of handshake that makes you feel the urge to shake off the creepy chill immediately following contact like a dog does when coming inside from the rain.

“Yeah, I think I need to have a talk with Jeremy,” I said, looking past Eric’s boulder-like biceps at Liz.

“And when the hell do you think you’re doing that?” Liz’s voice cut through the air like a vulture descending to a meal, her arms folded over her chest. I stared at her with my lips pressed together, a hint that I wasn’t playing her little game.

“He’s my son, Elizabeth,” I said. The steadiness of my voice made me feel stronger than even the steroid boyfriend. “If I want to talk to him, then I’m going to talk to him. Does that make sense or do I need to spell it out for you?” Like I said earlier, I rarely say what I want to. This time, I don’t think I could have said it any better. Her mouth dropped open and she uncrossed her arms as if amazed to hear my voice take on that tone. In the past this had always been a warning of some impending insult, but her actual response surprised me.

“Okay, Tom,” she said. I can’t even imagine what Eric was thinking when she said this. His expression hadn’t changed from the lost child look.

“Okay?”

“Yeah,” she started, “you should talk to Jeremy.” Her voice sounded weak as she took Eric’s hand. I’d like to think that the weakness of his handshake had transferred to her. I smiled, more at that thought than at Liz, but she smiled back. “Okay, we’re leaving. Goodbye, Tom.”

“Goodbye, Liz,” I said, giving a wave to avoid another disastrous handshake. “Take it easy, Eric.” He didn’t respond to that. I watched them walk a fair distance before taking my first step toward the parking lot. One conversation with Liz was enough.

#

I waited in the parking lot for forty-five minutes before Jeremy walked out of the locker room. His hair was wet from a post-game shower and looked more brown than red when the light from the lot's lamps hit it. His shoulders were sagged, making him look like he had a thousand pound backpack on strapped to him. I knew from his posture that the weight wasn't from his gym bag. He had the look of a young man struggling under the weight of guilt.

"Jeremy," I said, waving my arms in the air like a frantic tourist trying to hail a taxi. His head raised enough for him to spot me, then lowered and tilted to the side slightly as he started walking toward me. As he got closer I could tell that the skin around his eyes was red and puffy. "Hey, bud," I said, grabbing him by the shoulders and pulling him in for a hug. I missed those hugs, my little boy who'd grown up before I had the chance to get enough of them.

"Hey, Dad," he said. His voice was like a whisper, soft and full of doubt. It was clear that I would need to do most of the talking. I released my firm hold, but kept my hands on his shoulders as he stepped away.

"Are you hungry? You want to get something to eat?" I thought talking about food would help get his mind off of the game and his outburst. He shook his head. "Okay," I said, trying to sound like I knew what I was going to say next. Seeing him like this made it difficult for me to find the words.

"I just want to go home," he said, his voice a little more normal. "Can we just go home?" I nodded and gave his shoulder a pat. Even though the current situation was one I'd wished we didn't have to deal with, I felt good that he could call my house home.

"Let me take that," I said, reaching out and grabbing the gym bag from his grasp. I opened the passenger side door with my free hand and tossed the bag into the back seat, then walked around the back of the car to the driver's side and stepped in behind the wheel. I waited until we had been on the road for a couple minutes before trying to break the silence.

"So," I started, "there any girls you have your eye on?"

"No," he responded. His tone told me that I wouldn't get any more out of him on that subject.

"Oh, well how are your classes?"

"Good." It was fairly apparent at this point that I wasn't going to get much more than one word answers during the drive, but I had to try one more approach.

"You know, son," I began, trying to find the right way to say it, "it's not the end of the world." He

shuffled in his seat as if I was a dentist who'd accidentally hit an exposed nerve.

"Losing the game." He turned his head to face me. Out of the corner of my eye, while trying to keep my focus on the road ahead of us, I saw tears welling up in his eyes. I tightened my grip on the steering wheel to keep my own tears from forming. "I mean, you gave it your be..."

"I don't want to talk about it, Dad," he said, cutting me off. He turned his head back toward the window. I wanted to push, to try and get him to talk to me, but it made more sense to leave him alone until we got back to my house. The rest of the drive was silent.

#

When we got home Jeremy went straight to his room without saying a word. He didn't slam the door, but he certainly did more than just shut it behind him. This made me feel guilty. I'd missed the last two months of his baseball games using work as an excuse. Worse than missing the games was the fact that I didn't know what to say to make it right, to comfort him. I sat down in the living room to think over my next step.

I couldn't barge into his room and tell him how disappointed I was with his behavior after the last strike. Certainly not after the way I'd acted since the divorce. How could I? If he was younger I might be able to, but Jeremy was old enough to see the hypocrisy of that argument now.

And how do you tell your son that it's okay to lose? The more I thought about it the less sense it made to me. I don't know if losing is ever a good thing. Sure, there are lessons to be learned and ways to improve you as a person, but is that really what I needed to say?

I sat in the dark living room for twenty minutes running circles through these questions. Should I be completely honest with him? My own father would have been laughing like a hyena at this whole situation. I could actually hear him saying, "I told you being a father wouldn't be easy." For once, I found it easy to admit that he was right. Finally, I decided that I just flat out needed to talk to Jeremy about something. It might not matter what the conversation was about, as long as we had a real conversation. I stood up and walked to his door.

"Jeremy," I said, giving the door a couple light knocks. "Can I come in, bud?"

"Go away, Dad." His voice was shaky. He was obviously still pretty upset.

"I'm coming in," I said, turning the knob and slowly pushing the door open to catch him sitting upright on the side of his bed, wiping furiously at the moisture under his eyes. I walked over and sat down next to him. "You alright?"

"I don't know," he said. He stared at the floor.

"Is it the game?" He shook his head at the question, as if the question would go away if he shook hard enough. I reached over and rubbed his shoulder. It seemed like remaining silent until he spoke was the best strategy. Finally, he looked at me and started talking.

"It's," he started, breathing heavy, "not that we lost." I felt a quick flush of relief with that statement. At least I wouldn't have to give him the cheesy "dust yourself off" speech. "It's what I said." He looked me directly in the eye when he said this, like his eyes would say the words that he didn't want to repeat.

"Oh," I said. He spoke again before I could think of anything meaningful to say.

"I made myself look like a fool, and," he said, pausing to clear his throat, "I made my team look bad and I embarrassed you and Mom." He looked back down at the floor. Tears threatened to form in my eyes. I clinched my jaw and swallowed to fight them back.

"Bud," I said, rubbing his shoulder again, "nothing you ever do will embarrass me." I let those words sink in before continuing, "Tonight you made a mistake, Jeremy, that's all. Look at me, son." He slowly raised his head to look me in the eye again. "Everyone makes mistakes, Jeremy. I've made mistakes." His eyes widened with the last comment. At first, I thought that I'd regret bringing my past into the conversation, but it seemed natural seeing as I'd made some serious mistakes in the past year.

"Like what?"

"Well," I started, taking in a deep breath before saying, "I cheated on your Mom." The statement came out as if on its own will. That's not the exact mistake I had wanted to bring up. I just hoped he wouldn't want too many details.

"Why?" I could see in his eyes that he wasn't surprised. Liz must have told him right after the divorce was final. More importantly, though, was the overall look he gave me. It was free of judgment. Simply, it was the way a son looks at his father when he's genuinely curious.

"Huh," I huffed. I scratched the crown of my head. "Well, son, it's hard to explain." His shoulders sagged again, telling me that my answer was less than satisfactory. I shifted the way I was sitting and took a breath. "Okay," I started, "I was out of town on a business trip. Do you remember when I went to L.A.?" He nodded. "So I was in L.A. with some co-workers and a couple of us decided to go out for drinks after a meeting. One drink turned into a few and then into a lot and we were all pretty drunk. One of my co-workers started to come on to me and I wasn't thinking, son. I was drunk and." I stopped myself there. I didn't want to make excuses. "I slept with her." He nodded and looked back down at the floor

for a moment before looking back at me.

“Are you sorry?” Hearing him ask that question took me to the edge. It took every thread of strength not to break down.

“Yes,” I said. There wasn’t anything else to say.

“Do you still love Mom?” I couldn’t keep the tears from welling up in my eyes.

“Yes,” I said.

“Why don’t you tell her?”

“Oh, Jeremy,” I said, forcing a smile as I gave his shoulder another rub, “It doesn’t work like that. You only get one chance with that one.” He nodded. His eyes were darting back and forth, as if searching for what he wanted to ask next.

“But I get more than one chance with the mistake that I’ve made?” He had a point. You can never erase a mistake.

“You just lost your temper, Jeremy. That could happen to anybody, but you do need to apologize to the umpire. Apologize in person so that he can see that you’re truly sorry, and tell him what you learned from the mistake. That’s the most important thing, son, you’ve got to learn from your mistakes or else you’re doomed to repeat them. You understand?” He nodded. I felt drained from this conversation and I could tell that he was tired too. I gave his shoulder a pat and said, “Get some sleep, okay? If you want to talk more in the morning we can do that, but let’s go to sleep now.” He nodded again, his shoulders rising with a deep breath. I got up and walked to the door. “Light on or off?”

“I’ll turn it out in a minute,” he said.

“Okay,” I said, taking a step out into the hallway, “goodnight, Jeremy.”

“Goodnight,” he said. I closed the door and walked down the hall to my room.

I lay in bed for a couple hours, unable to sleep with my mind racing. What would we talk about in the morning? More importantly, would I have the strength to talk about my mistakes more in the morning? I couldn’t know for sure, but I did know one thing: I’d lost my wife because of a mistake and I’d be damned if I let myself lose my son too.