

To Kill the Pain

By Miles Ryan Fisher

The clock wouldn't leave me alone until, one by one, thirty of its minutes passed, sixty of them passed, the night passed, and it was all so futile. So I slid out from under my warm blanket, the one my mother knit, and pushed myself off the bed.

I rubbed my face, stepping around the colorful pictures scattered on my bedroom floor. They sat mixed up in small, cluttered piles surrounding the envelopes I'd taken them from. Plastic pouches of old negatives peeked outside of those envelopes. *Negatives*, I thought. *I remember negatives.*

I opened my dresser and stared at my clothes, all folded and organized. I grabbed a pair of ripped jeans, a black hoodie, and tossed them on my bed. I picked out some other shirts, light sweaters with collars, and tossed them onto my duffel bag. All of the clothes unraveled mid-air. *What do you even wear to something like this, anyway? Is there even anyone out there to ask?* If there was someone, I didn't know how to find them, and if I did, I doubt they'd know what to say.

I packed my bag and walked outside where the street was still lined with cars. The wind slapped me awake. The car's door handle stuck a little because of the early morning frost. I slid into the driver's seat and sat there staring at the steering wheel. *What do I say to him? I mean, what do you say to someone who is suffering so badly they decide to end their life?*

What if that someone is your best friend?

The wind blew straight into the car, stinging my cheeks and chapping my lips, and I shut the door once I realized I'd left it open.

I left Mount Pleasant, a place hunkered inside Washington, D.C., and drove up through Maryland and Delaware until I slipped past Philadelphia and back into my childhood. I pulled around the corner of my suburban neighborhood and down a street that never changed. Siding was still white, shutters were still blue, and brick still formed the base of every house.

My car slid into the driveway in third gear. No roaring downshift into second. No obnoxious downshift into first to let my mom know that her son was home. Just third gear, then neutral. I grabbed my bag from the car and headed into the open garage, over and around power tools and lawn equipment, the splintering work bench and rusty toolboxes filled to the brim.

Once I opened the door to the family room, I saw my mom right where I expected her to be. She wore a faded charcoal apron with white stripes running down it, the same one she'd had since I was little.

"Hi, honey," my mom said once she saw me. She didn't perk up with an *Oh! How's my Grant!* and walk straight to the door to wrap me in a hug and smother me with a kiss. Instead, she held onto her rubber spatula, letting chocolate syrup ooze down it and onto her fingers.

"Hi, Mom." I dropped my duffel bag on the family room floor and walked into the kitchen to see the bowl of green grapes cut neatly into little bunches sitting on the kitchen table alongside the dish full of peanut M&M's. But my mom didn't mention them. She didn't even tell me there was Coke in the fridge.

"Let me get your father." I could hear the leaf blower reverberate right through the walls of our house. He was in the backyard collecting all the leaves.

“I’ll go get him,” I said. I went out to the backyard and yelled. “Dad!” A couple steps closer. “Hey, Dad!” A couple more steps. He just kept going, kept pushing that leaf blower—the same one that chopped half of his index finger off a few years ago—across the backyard. Crispy brown leaves, the kind that crumble into little pieces when you roll them in your hand, blew toward the compost pile by the creek that bounded our backyard. The trees were starting to look bare. I walked up beside him as he kept pushing and tapped him on the shoulder. “HEY DAD!”

He made some sort of indiscernible grunt and turned off the leaf blower. “Yeah hey, Grant.” He took off his work gloves and gripped my hand with the same force I imagined he used when clutching a wrench.

“A lot of leaves, huh,” I said.

“Ah, I let it go for a couple weeks on there. Got a little lazy. Figured I’d get them back to the compost before the first snow hits.” He scratched his two-day old scruff and looked at the leaves as if he were assessing his work. “You just get in?”

“A couple minutes ago. I just said hi to Mom. She’s baking some brownies for you.”

“Oh hogwash.”

“Better take advantage cause this is the only time you get them.” I patted him on the shoulder. “And besides, you know I can’t eat them all. So steal as many as you want—I won’t tell Mom.”

We went inside and sat down at the kitchen table. My mom set down her spatula again, this time tilting it against a pan of freshly frosted crème d’menthe brownies. I wasn’t hungry, but I picked up one of the bunches of grapes and chewed on them one at a time. I figured it was better to do that than to sit there and chew my fingernails instead. I stared at the kitchen table, waiting for my mom to say something.

“Are you going to be alright?” she asked.

“I don’t think I really have a choice,” I said. I looked at my mom and then over to my dad, who sat there with his head still. “It’s not like this didn’t occur to me as something he’d do. And once the law changed, I just … knew. I mean, he’s been in pain for so long. It’s hard to even remember the last time things were normal.”

“I’m surprised J.B. hung in there this long,” my mom said.

“He battled it much longer than I would have. There’s no way I could’ve made it five years.”

“It’s just hard to imagine something like this exists.” My mom took off her glasses and wiped her eyes with the palm of her hand.

“And you know what the worst part is?” I said. “Nobody can know what he’s going through. He can’t explain it to anyone. He’s utterly alone in what he’s experiencing.”

“I just hate seeing *you* have to go through this,” my mom said.

“It doesn’t compare to what he’s gone through though. I just,” I swallowed a dry mouth, “what do I say to him?”

“I don’t know, Grant. I don’t know what you say.”

I don’t want to go over there, is what I wanted to say. *I want to collapse into a deep sleep and not wake up until this fucked up dream was over*. But I couldn’t do that. I had to be there for him. I had to let him know that I supported his decision, no matter how much hurt it would leave behind. And I had to hide that from him—the hurt. I looked at my dad and waited before I said anything.

“I guess I better head over there.” I got up from the kitchen table.

“Do you think you should take something over?” my mom asked, only because she was so used to sending her baked goods with me wherever I went.

“I doubt they have much of an appetite,” I said. I headed for the door, and my parents got up to follow me outside. “I guess I don’t know what time I’ll be home.”

“We’ll be here,” my mom said. “Is that...,” she started then stopped.

I looked down in my hoodie and jeans. “Does it really matter,” I said.

As I drove along the roads that curved out of my old neighborhood, I debated which way I’d take to J.B.’s house. There were so many ways I’d taken in the past. The quickest way. The prettiest way. The emptiest way that I took back when I was learning to drive stick. All of the ways I knew so well that it was strange to think whichever one I chose this particular time would be the one I’d remember most.

The side door to J.B.’s house was unlocked, as always. I walked right in, but this time I didn’t say a word. No *hello* bellowing from my stomach so whoever was in the house could hear me. Instead, I thought about all those times when I did do that, when he’d be waiting for me. Not like this though. Not like these past five years of him confined to a hospital bed that had been specially ordered and assembled in their living room. He lay there, a teal hospital gown draped over his stiff body. His arms and his fingers still. His head immobile, thin strands of his blonde unwashed hair sticking to his scalp. The bed tilted up so he didn’t have to lie flat, staring at a paint-chipped ceiling that had faded into a dull off-white. His eyes continued looking—always looking—in the same straight direction of the television propped up on top of an old brown dresser, the one that used to be in his bedroom. If you wanted to show him a picture, you’d have to walk over to his bedside and hold it in front of his line of vision.

The only time that line of vision changed was when his dad helped him out of bed and into a wheelchair that would take him down a hallway that was no more than ten feet away from the bathroom. Then his dad helped him on and off the toilet before wheeling him back down the hallway and getting him and his languishing body—his deteriorated muscles that were now just soft, sagging fat tissues—back into that hospital bed where he’d lie as still as before.

It was something relatively unknown to doctors, even though doctors never seemed to acknowledge that. Doctors, we learned, couldn’t admit that there were things they didn’t know about, things that all of medicine didn’t know about either. Instead, they told J.B. the pain was in his mind, not his body. And I think that probably hurt him more, more than the pain that ran through his body.

Complex Regional Pain Syndrome, they finally called it. CRPS for short. Not only did the doctors have trouble identifying the condition, they also had no solution for it. Some sort of condition where the body’s nerves continue sending pain signals to the brain long after what triggered the pain had healed. The pain is disproportionate to what originally caused it, and the cause can be something as minor as a broken finger or as major as a surgery. That’s when CRPS takes over, surging from an unknown place, taking over individuals who can’t possibly know it’s coming. A lot of times, the pain spreads from where cause occurred—hence the “R” for regional. In J.B.’s case, the pain spread through his entire body.

The pain, he said, felt like his bones were burning. It left him so sensitive that even the slightest nudge would cause him agony. He lay there, motionless in a hospital bed, unable to toss me a baseball, unable to pass me a beer, unable to even give me five. No, this wasn’t the J.B. I remembered.

The J.B. I remembered had a leather mitt on his left hand and was tossing a scuffed baseball into its oily pocket while the Phillies played on television. And whenever I’d show up, it

was like he expected me. We'd hang out, just talking and watching baseball. Maybe we'd go outside and have a catch or we'd order some cheesesteaks from Delasandro's and take the drive out to Henry Avenue to pick them up.

I stepped into the living room and saw his parents and younger sister sitting there with him, their faces tired, the pouches below their eyes sagging.

"Hey man," J.B. said.

"Hey," I said to J.B. I nodded to Mr. and Mrs. Bradley and J.B.'s little sister, Allie, gave me a half-hearted smile. All the times she'd try to tag along with us whenever I came over to play and now she looked older than ever.

"Thanks for coming," J.B. said, which I thought was kind of a strange thing to say.

"Jackson, I'll go get that video," Mrs. Bradley said. She got up, as did Mr. Bradley and Allie, and left the room as if it weren't abnormal for them to do so.

"What video?" I asked.

"You'll see," J.B. said.

We sat for a few moments in silence, which never really was a problem for us.

"Oh no *way!*" I blurted. "I know what video you're talking about. You *seriously* dug that up?"

J.B. laughed. Then winced. Everything hurt—even when he laughed, it aggravated his pain. "Not the one you're thinking of," he said.

"The one of me drunk for the first time?"

"We couldn't find it. My mom looked all over. It's gotta be somewhere though."

"You know I've never seen that? I think I'd have to be drunk just to watch it."

"You'll have to watch it at least once though. Whenever it pops up. I bet it's funny as shit."

But J.B. was wrong. It wouldn't be funny. Not anymore. One day it'd surface, and sure I'd watch it. I wouldn't call up the other guys who were there for it. I'd watch it by myself.

His mom brought a disc in, placed it by the television, and left without a word. J.B. and I talked for a little while, though I'd already spent a week with him two weeks ago when a lot of his friends came to visit for the last time. That week drained him. Interaction alone exacerbated his pain. He needed a week alone just to recover, to gather the strength he'd need. I was one of the few invited back for one last moment—one where it would be just us and our twenty-five years of friendship (we met when we were three—the first day of nursery school, actually).

After a little while, J.B. told me to play the video. When I put the disc in and hit play, the television screen went black. A wavy white light, the kind that's trying to get its bearings, squiggled across the screen. After a few seconds, it opened into color. The picture bounced up and down on the screen before it settled into a slight bobble. A set of digits counted in the top right, and a red dot with the letters "REC" beside it was in the bottom left.

At the bottom of the picture, there was a knotty wood fence, the kind that looks like several popsicle sticks lined up side by side. Off in the distance a couple of kids held plastic yellow baseball bats that had gray duct tape wrapped around the top where they'd been cut open and filled with newspaper—an effective way to cork wiffle bats.

The taller boy tossed a bright green ball in the air and eased a left-handed swing toward it. The ball rocketed off the bat, coming closer into the picture. The picture tried to follow it until *THUD!*—the tennis ball ricocheted off the aluminum siding of the house. The picture darted back to the kids, the shorter one now tossing a ball up and smacking it over the fence and into the

house. Each boy picked up another tennis ball out of a big blue bucket and launched those over the fence as well. Directly at the neighbor's house.

"Holy shit, how did you get this," I asked. "You must've ..."

"I told my mom to go over and ask Mr. Schaeffer if he had it."

"But look at the date. We were," it took me a moment, "*eleven.*"

"I guess he held onto it just in case he ever wanted to sue our parents to replace the siding of his house. Good thing we didn't hit any of his windows."

"Is he still pissed about it?"

"He thinks it's hysterical. Apparently he watched it before giving it to my mom."

"He sure as hell didn't think it was funny back then. But look at you. You always had a much sweeter swing than me."

J.B.'s blond mop of hair rose every time his bat glided through the air so effortlessly it made him look like he wasn't trying. Tennis balls continued to hammer the side of Mr. Schaeffer's house. We held up our swings for a moment and admired our handiwork by waving at his camera.

"Oh my God," I said. "We were such little assholes. Why were we doing this again?"

"Cause hitting home runs is awesome. And the fence was farther away on that side of the yard. Too bad for Mr. Schaffer we could still reach his house."

"I can't believe you somehow got this," I said as the video faded back into black.

"I can't believe he still had it."

"What was it filmed on, some sort of camcorder from Radio Shack?"

"I guess. My mom had to have a store transfer it onto a disc. I think we've hit the age where we're able to say 'back in the day.'"

I half-smiled. I guess half of me thought it was amusing that J.B. and I had hit that age where we now had a 'back in the day.' But the other half of me thought that we hadn't had a new day in quite awhile now. We didn't have any new pictures to mark any new times. While J.B. was confined to his bed, life continued moving. Pictures became digital, and all that remained for us were old pictures and all of their negatives .

"Grant," he said, "there's something I need to tell you. I've been wanting to apologize for a long time, just never knew how to say it."

Before I could say anything, Mr. Bradley came into the room.

"Jackson, it's time for your four o'clock," Mr. Bradley said. He held a glass of water and one of those paper bathroom cups. He placed a pill on J.B.'s tongue and raised the glass of water so J.B. could drink. Then he placed a second pill on J.B.'s tongue. Some sort of combination that I still didn't know much about. All I knew was that one of them was a Dilaudid. The other may have been methadone, something else I knew that he took. The amount of this pain medication J.B. swallowed on a daily basis would kill just about anybody. But for him, those pills didn't even quell the pain so much as take the slightest edge off.

"So what I wanted to say," J.B. started after he'd swallowed his pills and his dad left the room, "I'm sorry I didn't do more for you when you quit."

"Quit?" It caught me off guard. "Quit what?"

"You know what I mean."

"Back in high school?" Was there any other time? "But that was more than ten years ago."

"It still affects you. I know that."

"But it's not like there was anything you could do. Coach Stein had it out for me."

“It doesn’t matter. I should’ve done something about it. Something more.”

“Like what? Stein wouldn’t have listened to you or my parents or anyone else. He hated me for some reason.”

“He made you put your glove down for years. It’s not like you to give up like that. The thought of that alone makes me wish I’d done something instead of letting you quit. It’s like I wasn’t there for you.”

“But you *were*. You helped me through it. And there’s nothing that could’ve changed what was going to happen.”

“Knowing how my life turned out makes me wish I’d have taken a bat to his skull.”

“All that would’ve done is thrown you in jail for the rest of your life.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t be lying here like this. Even jail would be better.”

He wasn’t wrong, in a sense. The McGill scale, the one used to measure pain, assessed the constant pain that squeezed J.B.’s bones as being worse than amputation of a limb. It was even worse than natural childbirth. So who knows, maybe jail would’ve been better. Maybe had he gone to jail, he wouldn’t have contracted the parasite that doctors couldn’t find. And maybe those doctors wouldn’t have operated on him. And maybe the j-tube they inserted wouldn’t have gone straight to where the undetected parasite resided. And maybe they wouldn’t have left a piece of the j-tube inside him when they removed it. And maybe all of this wouldn’t have happened.

“It’s not like I’m not playing again,” I said.

“I actually smiled when you first told me that.” Even smiles hurt his face.

I didn’t tell him that I smiled as well—because when I looked around the field and thought of him, the smile hurt my face, too.

“But you know what really made me smile?” he said. “When you told me you started coaching.”

“Coaching? Why coaching?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know. You were always meant to coach. Much more so than play—no matter how good of a player you were.”

“It’s just something I enjoy doing.”

“Just something you *enjoy* doing? I pay attention when my mom reads me the stories you send, you know. Just because they’re funny as hell with the crying kids and jackass parents, it’s not like I don’t see what they’re about in the end. They’re always about how you’re there for those kids. Because you’re what Stein wasn’t. You don’t turn your back on your players no matter what. Not like he did to you. Which is why what he did to you makes me wish I’d taken a bat to his skull. If I could just get up from this goddamn bed, I still might do it.”

“But if you’d done that, we wouldn’t have gotten to go to college together.”

J.B. sat silent for a moment. “The more I lay here, the more angry I get about certain things. But I wouldn’t give up those times for anything.”

“Me neither.”

We talked about some of the times we had in college, ones that were simple re-creations of the times we were launching tennis balls at the sides of houses. Just now, we were older. We talked about the time we persuaded identical twin sisters to go on a double date with us at two o’clock in the morning (he and his date ended up together for the rest of the semester). We talked about the time we created our own spring break, skipping an entire week of class in order to drive eighteen hours from Ithaca, New York to Clearwater, Florida so we could watch the

Phillies play a few Spring Training games (we slept in the car). We talked about the time we went on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic to build a school in a southwestern town where tourists never visited (J.B. spoke fluent Spanish).

We tried to relive the stories since we couldn't make any new ones; we hadn't been able to for awhile now. But even with those memories, even with our combined recollection, we couldn't quite relive those times. I think we both knew that. I think we both knew they had long since slipped through our fingers and into the past. The only thing we were left holding was the fact that although we couldn't relive them, we couldn't unlive them. They would always exist long after we would both be gone.

Then J.B. asked me a question that made my throat choke.

“What do you think you’ll do with the rest of your life?”

I didn't want to do anything at that point. I didn't want to think about the rest of my life. I didn't want to think about how he wouldn't be there to know about it.

“Oh I guess it doesn't really matter,” J.B. said. “I'm sure it'll be something you really care about. I was just curious.”

Social work, I should have said. Helping those who nobody else would, or could. I'd started getting my Masters in Social Work, going to school at night for the past year. I never mentioned it to J.B. because I didn't want him to know just how much he'd continue to affect my life, that after experiencing this, I had to do something more than work on a labor rights magazine writing about injustices in the workplace. I needed to dig deeper, needed to travel closer to a place where pain existed. I needed to be there for those who suffered just like I'd been there for J.B.—and I didn't want him to know this. I didn't want him to think that he'd be leaving his suffering for me to carry.

“I'm sorry I'm doing this, Grant,” J.B. said.

“You keep apologizing for things you've got nothing to apologize for.”

“I just ... can't take this anymore.”

“I know,” I said. “It's not like I haven't been here. I'm with you, whatever you want to do. It's your decision, not anyone else's.”

“Thanks.” J.B.'s eyelids drooped. He struggled to lift them back up, only for them to grow heavier. The pills were taking effect. “I hate to,” J.B. kept struggling, “but I need to rest.” I was used to having to go in another room while he rested, regrouped. But this was the first time it hurt to hear him say it—hear him say *I need to rest*.

“I know,” I said.

My hands sunk into the cushions, and I pushed myself off the sofa, my legs feeling as heavy as I imagined J.B.'s eyelids felt.

“There's one more thing I need to apologize for,” J.B. said.

“Does everything come in threes?”

“This one you're not going like.” And I could tell by his tone that he was right. “I'm going to do this alone,” he said.

“What do you mean—alone.”

“I don't want anyone here when I do it.”

With physician-assisted suicide, that was just it—the physician gave you the tools, but you had to carry it out yourself. It was illegal for anyone else to do it, including the physician. Not many people knew that. Not many people had a reason to.

“But I thought that's why you wanted me here. That I was going to be with you when ...”

“I'm not letting anybody be here for it.”

“*Nobody*? Not even your parents?”

“Especially not them. They’ll be next door waiting.”

I fell back into those sofa cushions, stunned. “If you’re concerned about me, don’t be,” I said. “I can handle it.”

“I know you can.”

“So what are you saying.”

“I’m saying good-bye, Grant.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

It was the last thing I wanted him to feel—apologetic. “I can’t believe ...” I shook my head.

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

I struggled back up, supporting myself on the arm of the sofa. “So this is how you want good-bye to be?”

“That’s not fair, Grant. It’s not how I want anything to be.”

“I know,” I said, a little ashamed. “I know it isn’t.” I walked over to him. All the things I could say to him, they would’ve taken an entire lifetime to say. And he didn’t have enough energy for that. Not anymore. “It’s just, there aren’t any words for this.”

“You’ve always been good with words. I actually thought you’d have something prepared.”

“I tried. I just couldn’t come up with anything. But you need to know that whatever you think about what happened with me, you were there for me. I’ll never forget that.”

“I should be saying that to you now.”

I mustered a half-smile. “All-,” I cleared my throat, “Always.”

I stood there an extra moment, one final everything packed into seconds. I patted the edge of his bed, the *edge* of his bed, because it’d hurt him if I patted any closer. I tried to leave, but my legs wouldn’t move. My body started to quiver, and I knew if I didn’t do something, J.B. would see the burden I’d be left with. So I reached down with both hands and picked up my leg, literally picked up my leg, and lifted it from the wet cement of this last goodbye.

Once I slogged my way to the kitchen, I hugged his parents goodbye, though goodbye meant something entirely different to us. I’d see them again. Soon probably. But it would never be the same. Maybe the years would stitch this together, but it’d never fully heal the wound. Every time I’d enter their house our greetings would be caked with scar tissue. And we would know that scar tissue isn’t simply evidence of a former hurt. It’s a part of you that is now vulnerable, and any time it gets knocked—even if just slightly—a disproportionate pain grips your entire body.

After I hugged Mrs. Bradley, her frail body almost collapsed the moment I let go, and Allie had to catch her. Allie nodded toward the family room, and I nodded back ‘it’s okay, take her away.’ As Allie guided her mom, a muffled sound came through her cries. “We love you, Grant.”

Mr. Bradley rubbed my shoulder, his hand a big mitt that always engulfed me. “Thank you for everything you’ve done,” he said, though I didn’t know exactly what I had done. To me it felt like I’d done nothing. Just sat there for years watching someone die in slow motion. “You will always be his best friend.”

“*Nobody*’s going to be with him?”

“We’re respecting his wishes,” he said. “And I don’t think it’s something Mrs. Bradley or Allie should have to watch.”

I nodded. It wasn’t something *anyone* should have to watch. J.B. realized that, and that’s why he wanted his last breath to be his most selfless one.

I walked out the side door, holding onto its metal handle as I closed it so it wouldn’t slam shut. My knees wobbled and I felt like falling onto their driveway to let the pavement imprint into my palms. Instead, I managed to recede into a sort of catatonic state, so that I could get to my car, climb into the driver’s seat, start the ignition, and pull myself away from J.B.’s home.

When I got home, I saw my mom in the living room with her knitting needles and yarn. I walked right by, forcing another half-hearted smile. I knew that if I went to her, I’d fall apart. Instead, I tried to keep holding it all in.

I walked into the kitchen, and on the table were two baseball mitts—my dad’s mitt and my old one from high school, its leather cracking from being left for years on a shelf in the garage. A ball was tucked in it, and beside it lay a note stuck to the kitchen table: *In the backyard.*

Naturally, I thought.

I picked up the mitts, mine still feeling cold from the garage. *It’s not even close to baseball weather.* I opened up the backdoor, and sure enough, I had to look up to see my dad. He stood toward the top of a twenty-foot ladder propped up against a tree sawing off dead branches. I walked over toward the base of the ladder, its sharp legs digging into the hard ground.

“Hey, Dad,” I called up to him.

“Oh hey there, Grant.” He drove the saw blade through the last remaining part of a branch. “You got the gloves?”

“Yeah. But isn’t it a little cold out?”

“Since when did that ever stop you?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “Never.”

The tree branch broke off and fell onto the other dead branches scattered on the ground. He climbed down the ladder and laid the saw against the tree. “Let’s see,” he said and reached out for his mitt. Once I gave it to him, he took the ball from me and made some sort of sound. *Hup!*

I took off toward the other end of the yard, and my dad lofted a blooper over my head. I stretched my body as far as it could extend and reached toward the ball only for it to soar a couple inches over my mitt’s fingertips.

“Aw come on!” he shouted because, to him, any ball that close should be caught.

I retrieved the ball and threw it back to him so that he could start tossing me grounders. I picked the first ones up no problem, so he started working me from side to side. I picked those up, too. It all settled into a familiar routine, one from long ago. A grounder to the forehand. Another one farther to the forehand. A quick one to the backhand. My dad tried to throw one just out of my reach, another close one that should always be caught. But I rarely missed. One after the other after the other. I stopped thinking so much; about today, about the ball, about the throw. I just reacted. Every grounder became exactly what they were in games—a blur of an object coming at you that you don’t think about because you don’t have time to.

My dad continued tossing grounders. Another to the right. One back to the left. And I continued fielding them. One after the other after the other. I flung my mitt toward one and barely caught it, my mitt bending my hand back. The next ball came directly at me. It bounced

on the unforgiving ground a few times before slugging me right in the chest. I trapped it there and threw it back to my dad. He was there and caught it.

My dad tossed another grounder, another one right at me. I bent down to scoop it up, and the ball did something it had never managed to do—it went right through my legs. I glanced into my empty glove before I turned and went after it, just a few steps back. When I reached down to pick the ball up, I tripped and fell. Or maybe my legs collapsed.

On my knees, the ball lying right in front of me, I started to sob. I couldn't believe he was gone. All the years, all the memories, and just like that they stood apart from me. Never to be added to. Never to be talked about as if they were new again.

And what about me? Who do I turn to now that you won't be around? You were supposed to be here for me just like I was supposed to be here for you. And now I have to go through this alone just like you're choosing to do right now. Only, my alone lasts much longer.

I felt my dad's hand on my shoulder. But he didn't say anything.

"I can't do this," I said.

"You have to, Grant."

"You don't understand." I struggled to get back to my feet, my legs shaking. I almost fell, but I reached out and supported myself on my dad's thick shoulder. "I need to go back."

"Back where?"

"To J.B.'s."

"Come on now. You know this is his choice."

"That's not what I mean."

"You're in no shape to drive."

"I don't care. If I run into a pole, I'll get out and walk."

I took a step in the direction of the driveway, but my dad's hand caught my shoulder. I turned with a *don't-try-to-stop-me* look carved into my face. It was the first time I'd ever given my dad a look like that.

"I'll meet you in the driveway," he said. "Let me get my key."

We got in his little two-seater and before he did anything—before he even put the key in the ignition—he fastened his seatbelt, something I'd never seen him do. He'd even dismantled the alert that automatically beeped in the car when you weren't buckled in. He shoved the key in the ignition, gave it a hard turn, and jacked the shifter from first gear into reverse. "Hold on," he said. And all I could hear after that until we made it to J.B.'s was the roar of the engine and the hard shifting of gears while I pitched from side to side in my seat.

When we roared into J.B.'s driveway, I opened the side door and didn't bother closing it. I ran in, but I didn't see his family. I went into the room where J.B. was lying there by himself, the shades drawn even though there were still a few weak rays of light outside. Total silence pervaded the room. No music. No television. No voices. His eyes were closed, and my heart felt sick. I looked down at the clear plastic cup resting on his bed right by his hand and noticed some brown pudding still in it.

His eyes opened. "Grant? What are you doing back here?" He saw my face, which was probably flushed and puffy, the same kind of face that comes with vomiting even after everything that was in your stomach is no longer there. "You look like shit."

"I'm not letting you do this," I said.

"What do you mean. You said you were with me. That this is my decision and nobody else's."

"I'm not letting you do this *alone*."

“Oh, *that’s* why you’re here? But I told you—”

“I don’t care what you told me.”

He let out a breath. “You don’t have a choice,” he said. “I don’t want you here for this.”

“No, *you* don’t have a choice. Look at you. You can’t get up. There’s nowhere for you to go. If you really want to do this, then you’ll have to do it with me in the room.”

“Then I’ll just wait until you have to leave. You can’t stay here forever, Grant. You’ve got a job and everything.”

“Then I guess I don’t anymore.”

We fell into silence for a few moments.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this to me,” J.B. finally said. “I just want to die alone.”

“But your death *isn’t* alone. Whether you or me or anybody else likes it or not. The pain’s going to go on.”

We fell into silence for a few more moments before J.B. did something that I didn’t think he’d do. He started laughing. Even though it hurt him, he laughed. *Oww*. And he laughed. *OWW*. And he laughed.

“What the hell’s so funny.”

“You’re such a stubborn bastard, Grant. And the best part is, nobody knows it.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“It wouldn’t be you if you didn’t do something like this. I almost feel bad for thinking you might not.”

Then *I* started laughing. “What a bullshit comment. That completely neglects whether or not it’s a good thing.”

“It is what it is,” was all that J.B. said.

It is what it is. It was what it was. I think that’s all we were left with—a place where we no longer worried about what was good or what was bad, what was right or what was wrong. Just a numb place of what is and what was and what will always be.

“But,” J.B. said, “it’s what makes you loyal.”

That’s when I walked over to the side of J.B.’s bed and picked up the plastic cup. I took the end of a plastic spoon and swirled the thick brown pudding. Then I dipped the spoon in and scooped a little out.

“You know it’s illegal for you to do this,” J.B. said.

“Not like anyone will ever find out,” I said. I held the spoonful up, the glob of pudding lying there like dead weight. “You ready for this?”

“Wherever I am,” he said, “you can bet I’ll have a beer waiting for you.”

I smiled a smile that turned into a grimace as I held back everything inside me that wanted to burst or collapse or combust. I lifted the spoon to J.B.’s mouth and fed him the toxins. His head remained still as I placed one spoonful after another gently into his mouth, right past his rotting teeth, yellow with decay because it was too painful to brush them. I laid the bottom of the spoon on his tongue until he closed his cracked lips and sucked the pudding, his Adam’s apple climbing up his throat, then falling back down. I scraped out the very last bit left in the cup, and we both knew that at that point, time was truly against us. We had five minutes.

You’d think our last conversation would’ve been full of deep sentiment, but somehow it wasn’t. We talked about very normal things instead. Like the future of Philadelphia sports. What our teams needed to do to win, the moves they needed to make. We talked as if it were just another discussion, something we’d simply dip into the next time we saw each other. Maybe we

were trying to deny what was impending, but I don't think so. I think we returned to the life that was most meaningful to us—being together with no end in sight.

J.B.'s lips slowed. They moved ever so slightly until they were motionless. His blue eyes went still when he drifted into the coma—which left another thirty minutes until the drugs would actually take him. I stood there for a moment, a daze that temporarily numbed all that I was feeling. Then I reached down and closed his eyes. It was the first time I'd touched him in over five years—and it was so he'd no longer see this world.

Or the pain he'd left behind.