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Opening Extract from...

Northwest Corner

Written by John Burnham Schwartz

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For Aleksandra & Garrick

SAM

'Arno – bus.'

Coach dips out of the locker room. Sam listens to the footsteps echoing down the long corridor and only now, knowing he's the last, removes the towel draped over his head. He picks up the thirty-one-ounce aluminum bat lying by his feet, jams it into the UConn duffel with the rest of his gear, and zips the bag closed.

The bus is already running when he climbs on. The row in front belongs to him now. The doors fold in with a sigh, and Old Hank shifts into gear for the three-hour trip back to Storrs.

Evening is falling. Sam slides his headphones on and tries to become just another shadow.

Into the athletic-center parking lot the bus doors open: high fluorescent lights, pools of blue night. A gangplank waiting, all lit up. He's sitting right behind Hank and should go first, but it feels less bad to stay where he is, headphones on, eyes nowhere, deep in the stump of his own mortification. Teammates start to shuffle by, smells of glove leather and greased eyeblack, hail-like rapping of spikes.

A hand on his arm. It's Jake, his roommate. Sam lifts one side of the headphones an inch.

'Heading back to the room?'

Jake's voice is almost insultingly tender. The comfort you receive when, bases loaded and two out in the tenth inning of the college play-offs, you strike out without taking a swing, ending your team's season.

'Shower up, at least. You look like shit.'

Sam shakes his head gratefully. The bat never even left his shoulder.

'Okay . . . see you later.'

'See you.'

Then the bus is empty, except for himself and Hank.

'This ain't your goddamn limo, y'know.' Hank's voice a gravel bed, snowy buzz cut and jowly neck turned round on him from the driver's perch. The dash clock reads 10.20. Out of respect, Sam pulls off the phones. A sigh from Hank as he levers the doors closed. 'So, fuck it. Where to, DiMaggio?'

Where to is O'Doul's: an off-campus, third-choice watering hole in town, nobody's date-night destination. The school bus pulls up outside. Neon fizzing through the windows, fun-housing the gloom.

He tells Hank to hold on, takes off his game jersey, and buries it in the duffel. He wishes the bag didn't say UConn in big white letters – it's not that kind of bar – but there's nothing to be done about it now. He's already down to the two-tone undershirt with the sleeves hacked off below the elbow and the dirt-stained away-game pants worn low, no stirrups, and the spikes that make each step sound like he's chucking bags of marbles.

'You're a million bucks,' Hank growls. 'Go get 'em, tiger.'

'Thanks for the ride, Hank.'

'We all got bad days, Sammy.'

'Yeah.' Suddenly, he's blinking back tears.

'Stay out of trouble, now.'

The bus doors start to close before his foot touches the curb. By the time he passes through the entrance to the bar, Hank and his caravan are gone.

O'Doul's is hot and crowded, the walls painted dark. For a long time, Sam stands drinking by himself. When a stool at the bar finally opens, he slides onto it, the UConn duffel shoved down into the sawdust-and-gum shadows at his feet. A Bacardi mirror with fogged glass hangs above the backbar next to a St Pauli Girl clock, the clock's hands frozen at twelve minutes to six, permanent happy hour.

''Nother?'

The bartender, wiping under his empty bottle.

'With a shot of JD this time.'

'Right up.'

He keeps forgetting. Trying to get back to just before – on-deck circle, pure ritual, mechanical drop of vinyl-covered doughnut over aluminum barrel, stretching the bat down his back and around, beginning to swing nice and loose. Watching the pitcher and timing the swing. Watching and timing till it's *second nature.*

No such thing, he needs to tell Coach. Just the nature you're born with, handed down through the generations.

He was thinking too much, even in the on-deck circle, before the first pitch was thrown. He can see it now that it's

too late. Not empty as he should've been, cleared out; too much junk in his attic. Thinking about what he'd do if the big chance came, what a game-winning hit would feel like. At the plate Stemkowski's just taken ball three and Coach is in the dugout barking, 'Good eye, Stem. Good eye, buddy!' The crowd (attendance announced at 683), roaring their heads off as Stem watches ball four ride in tight under his neck and starts jogging up the first-base line, loading the bases. And Sam stakes the bat handle into the packed dirt, dislodging the doughnut, the weight slips off and the bat becomes a *killing staff.* And for about half a minute a raw brute strength he's never personally experienced before comes surging through his shoulders down to his hands, and he strides into the batter's box believing for once that it's going to happen. The strength fills him, blotting out the past, till it takes him too far, tips the meter into the red. And because it's raw and threatening and not really there, this illusion of power, already leaving, leads him to his father. It makes him think of his father. At which moment, the first pitch on its way, he knows in his sinking heart how it's all going to play out.

DWIGHT

At 11.47 a.m., a man in a patterned vacation shirt not unlike mine steps out of his Lexus SUV, followed by his young son. I watch them through the front window from aisle seven (baseball, softball, more baseball) in a moment of commercial respite and quicksand reminiscence, a Rawlings infielder's glove cupped over my nose, its hefty price tag flapping, inhaling the bicameral whiff of factory-fresh leather. Trying, as ever, to situate myself in actual time and space. Call it a voluntary hijacking: I'm no longer in SoCal Sports in Arenas, California, in the year 2006, but in Pat's Team Outfitters in North Haven, Connecticut, circa 1966. Not fifty years old but ten. Staring up into my old man's wide creased face. Absorbing that shark-skinned voice as he tells me he'll buy me the glove I want, so long as I swear on my life to treat it right. But if he ever finds it food-stained or left out overnight on the lawn, abused in any way, he'll thrash me with it, that's a solid promise, and my playing days will be done. Do I understand? Already this dark shadow he's casting over me and the thing I've always wanted. Which dooms me somehow, the little poisoned apple he's offering. And still I crave the glove so much I'm going to give him the price he demands.

And then, before my first season of Little League is halfway over, early one morning he finds the Rawlings, that holy object of calfskin perfection, on our shitty, dew-soaked lawn. Just as he foresaw. I'm still in bed asleep, fielding grounders in my dreams, when he bursts into my room and beats me with it good.

Listen to me. These are the sorts of thoughts that too often come back while you're spending thirty months in the hole. And after, too. There's violence in the air, even when nothing is happening. The idea of personal control is just a noble pipe dream. What comes at you feels bitterly, in the end, like some echo of what's inside you. Like any vessel only more so, a place gets defined by what's in it. A hive hums and buzzes. A fist is nothing without rage.

The glass doors open: in come the man and his boy. I pull the glove from my face and replace it on the shelf. Dust myself off, as it were. The boy trailing off his dad's hip at four o'clock, but looking up into that trusted face and smiling. The guy turning back over his shoulder – a joke just passing between them, or a story, say, about soggy doughnuts, wafting in from the parking lot like a cool breeze in summer. Their outward physical details less interesting to me by comparison, though still notable: the dad's big expensive watch, like a hunk of gold bullion clamped to his wrist; the boy's pro-model Dodgers cap and special-edition Tony Hawk slide-ons. Upper-middle-class family, I'd say. He a rising associate in one of the investment boutiques in the recently developed Arenas business park or a tax lawyer taking a much-deserved, post-April 15th day off; his boy, at ten or eleven a promising private-school student with an easy, winning personality, though perhaps too enamored of skate culture and the slackers down by the piers

and so already being prophylactically primed by his parents for a future boarding spot at the exclusive Thacher School. Lacrosse, I decide, this kid's going to learn lacrosse, as the father checks their progress at the front of the store, the better to assess the aisles of merchandise and the somewhat dubious prospects for service. He spots Derek stacking boxed volleyballs in aisle three. But a first lacrosse stick is serious business, and possibly Derek, who takes night classes in diagnostic massage at UCSB and is today wearing a purple sun visor backward, doesn't look quite up to the task. So the man's gaze turns ninety degrees – passing over Sandra, my boss's fetching twenty-year-old niece, at the register – to land on me in aisle seven. I suppose that, ignorant of my résumé, he mistakenly considers me the safe bet for attentive shopping assistance in the store. And who can blame him? I am fifty years old, relatively fit yet comfortably substantial. My red plastic SoCal Sports tag says DWIGHT ARNO, MANAGER in clear white letters. Under expected circumstances I would be a figure of rectitude and probity.

To which I can only add that I still want to be. I still remember what it feels like to be that man, and not a morning goes by that I don't see his striving, confident image in the mirror of my thoughts. Which is maybe why, watching this father and son approach, caught in the glow of their radiant connection and prosperity, I can only stand in aisle seven, my mouth slack and my heart in lockdown. Still unable after all these years to relinquish my phantom grip on what I had and lost – a wife and son, whose health and happiness were my charge. I wore a suit to work and brought home year-end bonuses that make my current salary look like chump change. My young son and I used to walk into stores like this one and

elicit from glove-sniffing, minor-league salesmen like me, silent cries of want and memory. Because, for fuck's sake, the goal of life must not be to lose it all, to cause other people grievous harm and suffering, to wholly give up one's pride and respectability. To drop so low in the order of things that years later in an outpost far from home, clocking in for work and stepping forward to help a customer and his boy, you find yourself besieged by ghosts and mauled by a crippling need for atonement. When, let's face it, all the good folks really want is a lacrosse stick.

SAM

A GIRL SQUEEZES IN next to him at the bar, orders two drinks. Afterward he won't be able to say what the drinks were or anything about her except that her hair was brown and medium-long and he never asked her to be there.

Leaning into him, her right side against his left, she hooks a heel over the rung on his bar stool.

'You guys win?'

He shakes his head.

'So, next year?'

A month from graduation, there's no next year for him. 'Yeah, I guess.'

'You know my boyfriend?'

She gives a name, kind of foreign, that he won't remember till later. He just shakes his head again, not looking at her, but she presses closer anyway, her right breast indenting against his biceps.

'He got cut from the team freshman year. Don't tell him I told you, okay? He's watching us.'

She's drunk – he sees it now. Her face so close her lips are misting his left ear. Faintly repulsed, but not meaning harm, just needing space, he gives her a tiny nudge with his shoulder – to shake her off.

Too hard: his soft touch unbalances her. As if the wasted strength that earlier coursed through his body has cruelly lingered, turning back to waste. Her heel catches the rung of his stool and with a low cry and a surprising heaviness she tumbles sideways into the black woman on her left.

He's in the process of standing, about to apologize, when a hand grabs his shirt from behind and jerks him violently backward: for a moment, eyes rolling wildly over the browned ceiling, he is airborne.

His spine slams the floor, the back of his skull thuds into ungiving wood.

Dazed, internal flares dilating his pupils, he comes to on his knees in the rank-smelling sawdust; his brain fogged like that mirror, past the bartender's betrayed glare, which continues to serve down his own stunned reflection.

To his wonderment, a small clearing has formed around him. People staring from a safe distance, as if he still has teeth left to bite.

Stupidly he kneels there, pawing at the back of his head for blood.

The lugged sole of a boot splits his shoulder blades, catapulting him over the fallen stool into the bottom of the bar.

He lands on the UConn duffel, the aluminum bat crowbarring his chest – a blow so ferocious it's like smelling salts, waking some older, vestigial pain. Rage rises in him like animal blood. And suddenly everything but what burns inside him is underwater-quiet. He doesn't think; at last he just becomes. In one swift move he unzips the duffel, pulls out the bat and, levitating to his feet, turns on his assailant – just another young buck like himself, and so beneath his pity – and drives the bat two-handed, with all the strength he's ever wished for, into the guy's stomach.