For the Love of Another

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For the Love of Another

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with honors to the Department of Languages and Literature at Carroll College, Helena, Montana

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SIGNATURE PAGE

This thesis for honors recognition has been approved for the
Department of Languages and Literature.

Director

Date

Reader

Date

Reader

Date
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Abstract

"For the Love of Another" is a creative nonfiction piece relating the struggle of a high school student through the fall semester of his senior year. The story is set in Helena, Montana, where Stephen McLeod, the main character, undergoes two simultaneous narratives of injury: a physical injury suffered during a football season, and an emotional injury through the divorce of his parents.

The work itself is composed of several scenes, separated and pieced together chronologically. Beginning in June of 1999, the scenes stretch to December.

The title itself, "For the Love of Another," expresses a complicated theme resonating through many characters in the piece. The main character, Stephen, continues pursuing his football dreams for the love he feels for his teammates. Meanwhile, Stephen's father leaves his family for the love of another woman. Finally, a reader learns how much Stephen's mother sacrifices for the love of her children.

The writing style was influenced by several of the greatest authors of the twentieth century, including Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce. A combination of their styles creates a stream of consciousness effect.

The inspiration for the piece was drawn from an actual journal written during the time of turmoil. It is based entirely on a true story, though some events and names were fictionalized.
June 30, 1999

The grass, faded to brown from the dry heat, crunched underneath Stephen as he sat down to watch practice. The tips of mountains in the distance blurred with a swirling haze, the hot air too dense to allow clarity. *Logan, Utah. What a godforsaken place.* My God it’s hot. *Why in the hell did we come to camp down here?* The players were finishing up practice, running the last few drills before the scrimmages. They struggled to move, exhausted after two hours of work in the 102-degree heat. One player from a team in Idaho stepped out of line and let a few players pass, then walked to the end again, avoiding his turn. *Wow. Beat the little man, buddy.*

Down the street, half a mile away, stood the football stadium at Utah State University. *Cooler this morning. Running all those stairs in the stadium. Good rehab.* Wish we had a stadium like that in Helena. He looked down at his knee, tracing the surgical scars with his fingertip. *Not even swollen. I could have played this week. I know I could have played. Stupid being here, not even practicing. Watching these guys work their asses off. Why did I even come? See my uncle, I guess.* At the opposite side of a practice field Stephen saw his uncle, a Utah State coach, and watched him scream at a group of players, “Pick up the intensity! Let’s go men!” *He’s still got the fire. Man, his kids have grown up fast. Remember when Dawson was born. Three pounds. Poor kid.*

Trainers carried water bottles to the corners of the enormous field, and an air horn screamed in the center. Whistles shrilled as drills came to a close, and the players whooped with excitement. Sweat dripped into Stephen’s eyes. *Damn, it’s hot. Why am I here? I couldn’t stay home. Not with the whole team here. Senior year. I’ve gotta be at
camp. Stephen recognized a teammate, Jake Emmett, across the field. He stood bare-chested, muscles sharp and defined under a film of sweat, and poured water over his shaved head. And Jake. Fuck he’s good. I wish they would’ve let a freshman play for me until I got back, not the starting running back. But I’ll be back soon. Three more weeks.

Capital High, a team from Helena, Montana, gathered together from various drills on the field. Stephen rose to walk to the sideline where his teammates stood drenched in sweat. Across the field, a team out of Las Vegas wearing red and blue huddled together. They were paired to play each other, although Capital’s enrollment was exactly one-third the other school’s. The team in red and blue had sixty players at camp. Capital had thirty. These guys are huge. Wonder what they’re thinking of this little Montana school?

The practice field livened in preparation for full contact, and many teams shouted in anticipation. The team from Capital High transformed into thirty crazed animals. The entire camp looked toward the commotion from the tiny Montana team. Every player in Capital’s brown and gold joined in the roar, and passionate coaches screamed encouragement.

The Bruins lined up first on defense. Fierce screams greeted the team from Las Vegas as their offense broke the huddle. Stephen’s eyes widened as goose bumps pushed through the sweat on his arms. He yelled with his teammates on the sideline, “Let’s go Bru! C’mon now D!” He looked on as his teammates lined up. Trips. Check three. Roll down Greg. Watch pass. “Pass, Jake! Pass!”

The ball was snapped and the quarterback dropped back to throw. He set and got rid of the ball, throwing deep just before Capital’s pass rush reached the quarterback.
Jake ran stride for stride with the intended receiver. He sprinted down the sideline, timed his jump perfectly, and came down with an interception. Every player wearing brown and gold erupted on the sideline. Players around Stephen screamed encouragement, “Atta kid Jake. Nice play kid!” Capital’s coaches shook their heads in awe, and several of Utah State’s coaches scratched Jake’s jersey number in notebooks.

Stephen screamed encouragement to his teammate. The offense trotted onto the field and Jake ran back to the huddle to play tailback. *God, I can’t wait to be out there.* As they lined up for the next offensive play, a thought crept into Stephen’s mind. He turned to face the mountains north of the field, their distant peaks drifting out of focus. Whistles and popping pads continued, but Stephen heard none of them. *I’m never going to play. Jake just stole my dream. I’ve gotta play. Now.*

June 31, 1999

His older sister drove. She had driven the six hours to Logan in one evening to pick him up. They left at eight the next morning. Freeway connected the towns, an easy drive. The speakers played softly, and Eric Clapton picked the last note of a gentle, sad song with fans applauding around him. Stephen glanced at his sister. *She hasn’t said a word. Waiting for me, I guess. Knows that I have to bring it up.*

Stephen turned away to stare out the window at the fence posts blurring by. His eyes were dry, but still red from crying himself to sleep the night before. Conversations from the previous day burned through his mind, from his coaches, his uncle, and his teammates. *That was so fucking stupid. Goddamnit you’re an idiot. How could you be*
so senseless? But it wouldn’t have mattered anyway. It was going to happen. It didn’t work.

Finally, after the Eric Clapton CD had started over again with loud cheers and tangled guitars, he spoke. “I’m such a fucking moron, Erin.”

She almost jumped at his voice, he had been silent for so long, and it took her time to find a response. When she spoke, her voice was soft and compassionate. “No you’re not. You know it might have happened three weeks later too.” He felt her eyes on him, probing, asking. No words for it. Stupidity. But why? It’s just not right. Not this many times. Why did this happen to me?

She finally broke, asking, “Steve, what happened?”

His eyes wandered back to the fence posts as they flew by the car window. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. How did it happen? All a blur. Fence posts. “I couldn’t take it, not practicing and watching those guys play. And I thought I was missing my chance. This was my dream Erin, ya know? So at night, the camp holds a passing competition without pads. I borrowed an extra pair of cleats from Danny, and brought my knee brace down to the field. I told Coach Sherman on the way down that I was gonna play with the JV that night in passing league. He tried to talk me out of it, but I told him it was fine. Therapy, I told him.”

Erin kept her eyes on the road, clicking on the blinker to pass a semi ahead.

When she got into the left lane, she looked back at her brother and tears started in his eyes. He told you not to play. You’re just a stubborn asshole, Steve. He began again, burying tears deep inside himself. “He let me play. His son’s the quarterback for the JV, you know. Great chance to impress the head guy, playing with his kid. We started on
offense, and the first play, I scored a touchdown.” Stephen paused. Erin, pulling back into the right lane, looked at her brother. Stephen smiled for the first time since she’d arrived yesterday.

She laughed nervously, “You’re kidding.”

Stephen laughed in return, but the tears still trembled under his next words. “No. I really did. A vertical route in man coverage. Just blew by my guy, Erin. It was incredible.”

Erin stifled a confused sigh in the ensuing pause, finally asking Stephen, “You did what?”

“Sorry.” Of course she doesn’t know. “One guy was supposed to cover me, and I beat him and scored.”

“Oh, okay.” She only sounded mildly informed, with a hint of uncertainty remaining.

He paused again, took a deep breath, and continued methodically, “We went on defense, and I broke up two passes.” He looked back to see she understood, and she nodded. She’s gotta know something. Her boyfriend’s a quarterback. “We get the ball again, and coach is just beaming at me. Just grinning. I was good, Erin! Truly. So he calls an out route for me, and I get open and Kyle throws me the ball. I make the catch just fine, and when I’m turning up the field to score—Pop! My knee goes.”

Erin winced as the story closed, but didn’t speak. Stephen watched her eyes as she searched her mind for a response. She’s seen all of this. Since the first surgery. She knows too. She knows how hard it’s been on Mom and Dad. Her eyes revealed a troubled look, concern, but they were masked with sympathy. All those surgeries, and
Dad around so little anyway. It must be so hard on them. Remember Mom’s voice when I called last night. So sad. Crying. God, I hate it when she cries. Stephen shifted his position as he thought about his mother’s voice, and a sharp pain shot up from his knee as he moved.

Stephen’s last words had hung for a few minutes when Erin looked to her brother and asked softly, “Do you know what you did? Is it surgery?” The little bit of hope fell from her face as she looked to him. He stared at the car mat on the floor before him, nodding his head slightly.

“How long?” she asked, staring forward at the white stripes rushing past her.

“Probably four months. They’ll try to fix it.”

He watched her doing the math in her head. Been there, Erin. It’s not good. “At the earliest, I’d be ready for the playoffs.” She stopped counting months, and reached for the air-conditioning knob. Eric Clapton lightly plucked guitar strings, a gentle trill over soothing melody. Erin clicked on the turn signal, and it ticked out of rhythm with the music.

Stephen’s eyes drifted back to the fence posts, rushing by as the car hurtled down the interstate.

July 28, 1999

The trip felt abrupt, too sudden altogether. Stephen’s dad had asked, “You wanna go up to Georgetown tomorrow?” matter-of-fact, one day, without warning. It came as a shock, but Stephen agreed before hobbling off, his crutches squeaking on the kitchen tiles.
The surgery had gone well, they said. Of course, this was the fourth time that he had heard those same words, so he crammed belief into his mind as he stuffed a change of clothes in his bag. But Stephen tried not to think about his knee as he and his father drove to the cabin. They talked, as they often did, about anything. His dad had always been easy to talk to.

They arrived, and Stephen took in the aged log construction of the cabin. The small, drafty rooms surrounded by tall, lodge pole pines felt like an escape from the world. His father threw their bags inside the cabin, and they drove back down the dirt road to the dock. Stephen stepped carefully out of the truck, then tightened the Velcro straps of his straight-leg brace.

The evening glowed, promising a clear night. The water on the lake gently touched the shore, only a few boats motoring to fishing holes on its surface. Stephen strung a rod effortlessly, and looked down at the boat. He found it down the dock about thirty yards, and cringed. *How am I going to get out there?* Staring at the wobbly dock, Stephen felt his knee begin to throb.

*Stephen crept down one hundred feet of shaking dock. His crutches wedged between the wood planks, and throbbing pain in his knee forced him to dry heave several times before the last trial, getting into the boat. Stephen slid his braced leg over the side, and the boat tipped toward him as he slumped into the back seat. Finally, the motor turned over and his dad slipped the boat out of the dock and started out into the lake. As the pain in his knee subsided, Stephen took a deep breath and tasted the lake in the air. A chill rose off its surface.*
The wind rushed past him as the boat bounced across the water. *What a night.*

*Thirsty. Where’s that cooler?* He located the red plastic box beside his right leg.

Reaching into the icy water he pulled out two beers, handing one bottle to his father.

Water dripped from its label to the floor as he passed it. *Not often Dad lets me drink with him. Wonder why? It’s been a long time, too, since I hung out with him. Always so busy.*

*Patients, surgeries, deliveries. The life of an O.B. doc. Always so busy.* Stephen’s dad took the beer without looking, wind blowing his hair as he drove the boat. *But there’s nothing wrong with a few beers with your dad. Fishing. What’s hatching? What month is it? July? Probably caddis then, or an Adams.* He reached for his fly rod as the motor’s throb weakened and the boat slowed.

They cast with natural ease and rhythm. Stephen’s dad leaned against the front seat of the boat while Stephen sat in the back. The sun dipped toward the horizon.

Stephen checked his watch after only forty minutes and reeled in. He talked to his dad, watching the mountain’s peaks fade in the dark. Eventually, their conversation and the beer called them both to be seated. Every few minutes a fish would jump with a gentle splash, and one of them would cast a fly into the twilight at the dissipating rings on the water.

“How’s your knee?” His father took a drink from his beer and watched the sunset, glowing orange red over the pines.

“It’s fine. The beer helps.” They had plenty, between the two of them, and both were feeling its effects. Stephen’s head spun a bit as he leaned back to watch the sky fade to black. One star hung just above the last purple band of sunset in the dark. A fish
jumped beside the boat, and neither of them moved. They just drank, listening to the oncoming night.

Stephen’s father tried to speak several times, and stopped, before offering, “You know, you may be able to make it back for some of the season. I talked to Dr. Carpenter today, and—” He left the sentence hanging, waiting for Steve’s reaction.

Stephen frowned, and looked down at the swollen joint inside the gray brace. The incisions were hidden, still covered by bloodstained steri-strips. Why? “Yeah, I’ve thought about it.” The words came out hurriedly, and Stephen let them hang alone.

*There’s no way I’ll play after nine games. It’s too far into the season.*

The silence that followed swallowed them both, not nearly as pleasant as before. Stephen sensed his father’s desperation as he wildly searched for a subject to move the conversation. He found humor, finally, and joked, “Any girlfriends?”

Stephen looked down the length of the boat and smiled at his father. *Can’t stay mad out here.*

“Any?” he asked sarcastically, “you mean ‘how many?’” They both laughed and the sound carried out across the water and echoed around them. Stephen added through his laughs, “C’mon Dad. I know how to play the sympathy card. Hell, that’s why I take my crutches with me.” His dad chuckled, and took a drink.

An owl called, far away in the pines on the shore. The sound carried far across the water’s surface. Stephen’s father took a deep breath of the lake air, and spoke while exhaling, “Man, that’s somethin’ isn’t it? Creepy hearing that owl out here in the dark.” The owl seemed to enchant the night, and the darkness crept in closer. The mood turned
somber again, dark like the night around them, and this time neither of them turned to humor to break the spell.

His dad took a long drink, finishing half a bottle of beer, before he spoke next.

“You know, Steve, I love you a ton.” Stephen’s head turned to his father and tried to find his eyes through the night. He was outlined, on the other end of the boat, but Stephen had trouble seeing his face. That tone. This is serious. Just the way he’s speaking. What’s this about?

“Steve,” he continued, slowly and hesitantly, “Whatever you do, marrying someone you can talk to. You’ve got to find someone you can communicate with. Otherwise, it just doesn’t work.” He was beginning to find a rhythm, speaking more quickly, but still being careful of his words. “I’ve always loved your mother. But we just don’t talk anymore. Since your—” Blood flooded Stephen’s face when he realized his father’s thoughts. Since your surgery. That’s what he was going to say. Since the surgery.

“There have been times, Steve, when, when— When I haven’t been perfect.” Through the dark Stephen could feel his father’s eyes, pleading to him to say something.

Shakily, Stephen offered, “No one’s perfect, Dad. You can’t expect to be.” Where is this going?

His dad’s breathing was uneasy now, and he sighed a great deal as he found words to continue. “Steve, I— I don’t know how to say this. Your mom and I have had our problems, and there have been times when—” Holy shit, there’s no way he...

With a deep breath, his dad began again, with less hesitation, as if he had made a decision. “Steve, I haven’t always been faithful to your mother.”
Holy shit. This can’t be happening. What in God’s na— What does he want me to say? Why are you telling me this? Where? How? Say something. Ask something—

“You’re not seeing someone now, are you?”

“No, Steve, I’m not. I’d tell you if I was.” His head was lowered, looking at the floor of the boat, as he spoke, silhouetted and faceless. “It’s just that everyone should have some happiness. I sometimes don’t feel loved, and— I deserve to be happy. Everyone deserves to be happy.”

There’s no way he would—“Have you thought about leaving?” There’s just no way.

His father’s voice faded, hopeless and distant. “I’ve thought about it. I’ve thought about it a lot.” His dad resettled on the vinyl seats as he spoke, and they squeaked under him.

What the fuck!? Why are you telling— Where did this come from? You can’t leave, not until... “You would have to wait until Elizabeth graduates, Dad. You would have to. She’d never understand. It will tear her up. She’s just not old enough to understand yet.” Stephen paused, waiting for a response. “You’ve gotta promise me,” he pleaded.

His dad sighed, again, as if he’d already been to this place and knew it well. “I know, Steve. And I’m sorry. I love you kids. I love your mother. I’ll make it work, I’ll stick it out.”

He can’t leave. He wouldn’t. He’s our dad, and mom can help him. When did he—no, it doesn’t matter. Should I... “I still love you, Dad.” Shakily, Stephen stood up and carefully hobbled the length of the boat to hug his father.
The world pushed into Stephen’s consciousness from a confused grey haze. Country music played from the alarm clock on his nightstand. Light seeped in through the blinds. \textit{Fuck. Forgot to turn the alarm clock off.} He began to roll over and a sharp pain shot from his left foot through his spine. \textit{Motherfu—mmm... Wow that hurt.}

Wide awake from the pain, Stephen delicately reached to a button on the radio. The clock’s numbers glowed green, 9:15. The down comforter weighed heavily on his body. He stretched his arms and back, yawning. \textit{They just started an hour ago. Probably just breaking into offense and defense now.} Images of a grass field surrounded by a dirt track sped through his mind. Half the field was covered with players in yellow practice jerseys, half wore white. Whistles screeched, followed by deep yells from the coaches.

Someone banged a pan against a countertop in the kitchen. A smell pricked Stephen’s senses, and his stomach groaned. \textit{Bacon cooking downstairs.} Pain shot through him again as he began to stir. \textit{God, I need some meds.} He found the crutches next to his bed and rose slowly, hobbling into the bathroom. \textit{Take a shower first, before breakfast.}

The water slowly heated up while Stephen undressed. He sat on the toilet, pulling a black garbage bag over his brace. \textit{God I wish I were out there. Senior year and I’m getting out of bed an hour into the first practice. It’s just not fair.} Two strips of duct tape high on his thigh cinched the bag tight. \textit{Those guys are out playing ball and I’m taping a plastic bag around my leg.} Not focused as he finished taping, Stephen felt his leg hair stick to the tape behind his thigh. \textit{Damn. That’s gonna hurt.}
Stephen carefully stepped onto the shower floor, healthy leg first. The warm water rushed down his face and splashed off the garbage sack. *What am I going to do today? Sit around the house and feel sorry for myself?* The cold shower wall startled him as he leaned back against it. *Wonder if I could do something if I went down to practice?* Coach Ferlicka is the only DB’s coach. *He might need some help with the young guys.*

The soap slipped out of his hands as he reached to grab it, falling to the floor with a surprising thud. Stephen extended his bad leg to the shower wall as he bent down to retrieve the soap. *I might be a nuisance. No, they’d tell me if they didn’t want me around. What time’s the second practice today?*

Someone flushed a toilet in the house, and Stephen scrambled to get out of the scalding water. *Jesus that’s hot. Practice at 2:30 this afternoon, I think. I’ve gotta go. I already miss it.* Again, Stephen drifted, seeing the field and his uncle coaching the running backs, “C’mon men. Let’s go.” An idea floated up through the vision. *That’s it. I could coach. It runs in the family, I guess, one uncle at Utah State, one at my high school—nothing wrong with trying it anyway.*

As Stephen stepped back into the water, the garbage sack under his left foot slipped on the slick floor. He frantically struggled to regain his balance, and the pain hit him as he found it. A wave of nausea followed closely behind, and Stephen doubled over, vomiting water and bile into the drain. *Fuck that hurts. I’ve gotta get those meds.*
September 2, 1999

There were only twenty-five desks in the classroom, so many players sat on the floor. A few hadn’t showered after practice in the ninety degree heat, and their stench stuffed the room, making it difficult to breathe. The players settled into their seats, talking nervously and waiting for the odd man before them to begin speaking.

Stephen limped in, cautiously stepping over other player’s legs, and sat against Coach Sherman’s desk. He searched the man before them, taking in his oversized head and thin limbs. Where’d this guy come from? Always wondered. Seems so small. A player walked past the man behind the small teaching podium, and Stephen had a comparison for height. But he’s probably 6’2”. Weird guy. But smart. What do I have for homework tomorrow? Calc, but that’s only four problems. Do I have to read anything for English? First act of Hamlet maybe? Wonder if we’re gonna read Lear this semester?

The small man peered behind thick glasses at the young men settling around the room, and cleared his throat. Those still standing hurried to their seats, and the room hushed to silence. Stephen watched a sophomore, sitting in the last row and staring ahead with frightened eyes. God, I remember my first time. I was so damn scared. I didn’t even know what Devotionals was.

“I’d like to thank you for allowing me to be here. This makes sixteen years that I’ve been speaking at these Thursday night gatherings. It is a pleasure to be invited back.”

The five young men were sitting together on the other side of the room. *First time tomorrow, fellas. You ready? Lead fifty teenagers to a dream?* He began to listen again.

“For those of you who haven’t been here before, I am not a priest. You do not have to call me ‘Father.’ Simply Tom will do, or, if you must, Mr. Williams. But I do speak about God. I’m here to tell you about the Bible, and show you how it relates to the game that brings you all together in this room.”

A senior player rose near the far wall and opened two windows for ventilation. The windows faced the west, and the sun was beginning to touch the mountains on the horizon.

Mr. Williams looked at the player and smiled. “Thanks. It was getting a bit ripe in here.”

Soft laughter rolled through the room. The player sat down again.

“First let me read a passage. I’ve started with this same one for about the last ten years. I want all of you to realize this one point, from the beginning. It is from Matthew, in chapter seventeen, and Jesus is walking with his disciples, his friends, through a crowd of people.”

The man’s eyes dropped to the Bible spread on a small podium before him. He began to read, “A man came to Jesus, and said, ‘Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.’ Jesus responded, ‘You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? Bring the child here to me.’ And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and
said, 'Why could we not cast it out?' Jesus said to them, 'Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have the faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to a mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; nothing will be impossible to you.'

The odd man, after reading the passage with great eloquence, paused momentarily to allow the words to sink in to his audience. He spoke, quietly, explaining something as if to a child, with great tenderness. "You see, gentlemen, Jesus is telling his disciples something that you have known since you began playing football. In this game, there is a common goal. All of you know what you're trying to achieve. But your ultimate goal will never be realized without faith in the person next to you." Stephen nodded in agreement as the man spoke, but the man seemed to back up in his mind, and try to explain his message again.

"Let me put this another way. Every one of you is an individual. But when you step onto that field, working for something greater than yourself, striving for that common goal, you are so much more. And the one element that binds you together, the one ingredient that will allow you to succeed, is faith. Have faith in the person next to you. Know that the person next to you on that field will do whatever it takes to be successful on any given down, not for himself, but for something greater." His words slowed, now, and his voice was low, but strong. Every word was emphasized. "I tell you, men, as Jesus told his disciples, that if you have faith, as small as a mustard seed, you will succeed. If you'll give all you have to reach that common goal, not for yourself but for something greater, you will move mountains. Nothing, for this football team, will be impossible."
The white board behind him added color to the man’s face. Stephen watched him survey the room, taking in all the young eyes and meeting their gaze for a moment.

*Tradition. Don’t know where he came from, but he is that. Not even preaching, but setting a mood. Somber and serious.*

“Let us pray.” A soft movement stirred the room as the young men bowed their heads. “Loving God, we would like to thank you—”

Head bowed, Stephen stared at the blue and red flecks in the gray carpet. *Wonder if anyone is listening. Suppose we’re listening to this guy and praying to a God that doesn’t exist.*

“Amen. Thank you, men, and good luck tomorrow.” The man bent down carefully to pick up a briefcase and softly stepped out of the room.

The door clicked shut behind him, and the room instantly bustled with activity. Cans of Copenhagen and Skoal were tossed around as many of the players produced empty bottles from backpacks. Two of the captains walked to the white board, and each wrote on one half: “Offense” and “Defense.” Under those headings, they began to write out goals for the first game of the season.

Stephen caught a Copenhagen toss from Joe Horne, and packed the can absently. He watched as the goals were written. The energy in the room compressed. Taking a large pinch of snuff in his lip, Stephen tossed the can back to Joe and spit into an empty Sprite bottle. *This is the coolest thing we do. Get in a room and talk about this game, what it means to us. God I love this.*

The last goal was written, and the room began to quiet. Yet the energy in the room remained and hovered above the seated players. Sitting next to Stephen was
Brandon Martin, a huge, black, muscular defensive tackle. The sheet metal in Coach’s desk popped a hollow thud as Brandon stood up first. He walked back and forth in the front of the room, and finally said, in his best western-cowboy drawl, "Well heck guys." Every player in the room laughed at the only black kid in the room speaking like a true cowboy. You goofy fuck Otis. Otis. Nate gave you that name didn’t he? Stephen leaned forward to see a captain, Nate Kuntz, smiling at Brandon’s words. Remember his words: ‘The only black kid I know can’t be named Brandon. Fuck. Sounds too white. You need a real black name. Like Otis.’

Brandon’s tone was serious now, and his tone revealed his intensity. “You all know what we have to do. It’s the first challenge, our first opportunity to play together. Play with intensity tomorrow.” Atta kid Otis. Getting a little pissed off. I always knew you had that fire in you. Waited till senior year to show it. Brandon sat down in his place beside Stephen and gestured to him to stand up with a simple nod.

All right, here we go. Stephen’s legs felt weak, tingling as he rose. What was my first line? He spit tobacco into his bottle before looking to the team before him. His stomach tightened. His hands felt cold, and shook slightly. “Well fellas, I want to thank you for letting me be a part of this.” His voice quivered from his nervousness, and he cleared his throat. “I’ve played ball with the people in this room since fifth grade, and well, thanks for having me around even though I’m not playing. Most of you know that I probably won’t play this season, but I couldn’t possibly—” Just tell it.

Every player searched Stephen as he found the next words. A few eyes traced the scars on his knee, purple under the bright neon lights. “Those of you who are in my class may remember our first game as freshmen. We were in Bozeman.” The seniors nodded
their heads as they listened. “I’ll never forget that game. I’ll remember putting on that jersey for the first time. God that felt good. But I was so fuckin nervous. We were on defense first, and I started at right corner. I go running out, all one hundred five pounds of me, and they had this little black running back.” Again, some seniors nodded as the memory came back to them. “This kid was pretty good, and the first play, they ran a toss to my side. This kid gets to the edge, and turns up right to me. It’s me and him, one on one.” He paused and looked down for a moment. “I make the hit, but I stopped my feet on contact, so I spin around to the backside. He’s still running, up the sideline now, and I remember having one hand on his back for what seemed like forever. I remember looking at my fingers clenched on that jersey and watching as he slipped away.” He lost himself in the memory, recalling every feeling and tension in his body as the running back’s jersey slipped from his hand.

“The kid ran for sixty yards or so before Greg caught him. Coach Burke pulled me on that play, and I had my head down as I walked off the field. I was disappointed and pissed off that I missed the tackle. But it was selfish; I was pissed at myself for getting pulled, for screwing up, and I still didn’t understand. Joe Horne met me as I crossed the line, and wouldn’t let me get by. The only thing he said was, ‘You can’t let go, Steve. You can’t let go.’ And his eyes told me everything. I hadn’t let myself down. I’d let a team down. I was in this with fifty other guys, and they were counting on me to do my job, to be a Bruin. To play with heart, for the sake of the guy next to you.”

*Quit looking down. Eyes up.* Stephen looked up from the carpet. He paused, looking around the room at the players he knew so well. He found Joe and met his stare with his own. “I never needed to learn that lesson twice. Fellas, there’s one reason I’m
at practice every day with this shitty leg and no pads on. I still can’t let go.” Joe nodded slightly and bowed his head. Tears were heavy under Stephen’s next words, though he kept them underneath. “I love it all too much, fellas. And I know that you all feel it too. Get it started tomorrow, and don’t let go for twelve games. I’ll be right there with you.”

September 30, 1999

The sun hung just above the mountains, and they glowed orange with the fading light. Stephen took in the sight as he tied his running shoes beside the track. The practice field felt empty, void of the players’ voices and smacking pads.

The last few players were pounding the mud from their cleats on the steps of the school, and the cracks echoed through the thin air.

Behind the west end zone, an old scoreboard stood next to a grove of trees. *Thing looks ancient.* He looked to the grandstands, where his mother had sat watching his freshman and sophomore teams, then back to the weathered scoreboard. *Can’t believe it still works. It must’ve been here when Dad played here.*

Stephen stood and quickly stretched his legs. *I’m hungry. Wonder if mom’s cooking dinner tonight. How long should I run? A mile? If the knee holds up that long.*

He started jogging a slow pace around the track. His knee felt weak, but yielded no pain. *All right, let’s go. Do you want to play or not?* Stephen lengthened his strides and quickened his pace. *Push yourself.*

On his third lap, a throb of pain settled into his left knee. It remained dull until the sixth lap, when it became sharp, shooting up his leg with every pounding step. He
finished the loop, then began walking around the field. He gasped for breath, sweaty arms dangling at his sides.

Stephen bent over, wrapping both hands around his knee. It felt swollen and warm, shaky under his weight.

*It’ll get better. A little every day. Just keep going.*

October 6, 1999

No laughter floated outside Coach Sherman’s room that evening. The energy filling it felt different, more tense and nervous. Outside, the first scattered flakes of snow fell to the ground.

Stephen stood up and the wave hit him. Excitement turned his stomach and goose bumps pushed through his forearms. The room, small from the number of bodies in it, closed around him. The heater clicked on in the corner behind him, and its humming was the only sound. He looked down, and took one deep breath.

“I’ve come to realize something, fellas,” Stephen’s words came, strong and deliberate. “My dream will never come true, not completely. I would give anything to be able to hear my name over that loudspeaker, to start in one game, to be able to play as one of you, as your equal.” Stephen’s eyes swept the room to the captains’ corner. “I’ll always wonder what it’s like to step onto that field, to make a stick and hear the crowd and the sideline. Goddamn, fellas, I’d give anything for that. And before cross-town, I feel it a little more.”

Joe’s eyes fell to his desktop. Stephen brought a Sprite bottle to his lips and spit, adjusting the Copenhagen in his lip with his tongue. “I’ve thought a lot about what it
would feel like, stepping onto that field. But I’ve gotta tell a story about last year’s game to make you see it.” Stephen rushed back in his memory to that game, kneeling on his healthy knee, hailing Mary with three seconds on the clock. Someone sitting along the back wall coughed into a fist. “Most of us would say it was the greatest football game we’ll ever see. Helena High had more talent than we did, but after a last-minute drive to the one yard line, there were three seconds left and we had a chance to win the game. We called an inside run, and we got stuffed, flat stuffed. But somehow, Travis bounced outside, got hit, and carried a defender draped on his back for two yards to barely get the ball across the goal line.”

Many of the players’ eyes stared down at their desks, wide with recollection. Some looked straight into Stephen’s eyes, feeling his intensity as he paced in front of the small podium. “Larson shouldn’t have gotten in, fellas. It just seemed impossible. So back in the locker room after we got inside, I asked my uncle, Coach Mac, ‘Dick, how’d he get in? Larson had to get by three defenders with angles, how did he get in?’ And my uncle had the answer.”

Stephen paused shortly, drawing his teammates eyes to his before he told them. “He said, ‘Coach Petrelli and Coach Tuss pushed him in.’” The room nodded with appreciation for the two Capital High coaching legends. A few rustled in their seats, like kids around a campfire telling ghost stories.

“Now, together, those two coached here for 25 years. I’ve been thinking about that answer, and it’s pretty fucking good. Still, it just doesn’t go far enough. Because it wasn’t just Coach Tuss and Coach Petrelli that pushed him in, it was so much more.” Something in Stephen’s voice quivered as he spoke, something raw and animalistic. His
pace quickened as he continued, “Every player in brown and gold on that sideline willed him in. Every fan in the stands, every former Bruin no matter where they were at that moment, they all had a hand between the one and the nine on Larson’s jersey, pushing him over the line. The trainers, the parents, the waterboys, the coaches from the past to the present, the eight-year-old standing on the fence wearing brown and gold with tears in his eyes, they all pushed him in. It wasn’t two pairs of hands that helped number nineteen last year.” Stephen slowed, emphasizing every word he uttered, but the power in his voice remained. “There were a thousand hands on his back that play.”

Stephen’s eyes fell into those of a sophomore safety. Red and wet with emotion, a tear still hung on his cheek. His hands shook on the desktop in front of him. The sight hurled Stephen toward passion. The next words sprung from him in a primal yell.

“Think about it men! That’s what this team is about! That’s what Capital High football is!”

Grief took Stephen as he embraced the emotion, and his voice softened with it. Scarcely above a whisper, scarcely covering tears, he said, “And that’s what it must feel like to step onto that field. When you step over that chalked line on Friday night under those lights, it must feel like there’s a thousand hands on your back, helping you, pushing you, to make every play.”

No eyes looked down. All met Stephen’s as he looked around the room with a pause. “God, men, I’d give anything for that. I wish I could feel it myself. But just realize, every one of you, that when you step on that field, my hands will be on your jersey, pushing you to make every play.”
October 11, 1999

Stephen’s hands were shaking as he pulled the truck into the parking lot. Only a few parking spots remained, and he pulled into one facing the building. He turned off the ignition, cutting the radio abruptly. The chorus kept on in his head.

It’s something unpredictable,

But in the end it’s right.

I hope you had the time of your life.

Looking up, he saw a doctor’s office with wood paneling. Remember this place being built. Third grade. Seems so long ago.

He sat staring at the building for a few moments. One deep shaky breath, and he opened the door to the truck and stepped into chilled October air. Looks so warm out. Sun shining. Should have worn a sweatshirt. He glanced at a wooden sign near the street. Dr. Jake McLeod. Wonder why he didn’t spell out Jacob? The name spun in his mind, and rapidly an image of Jake Emmett leaping for an interception choked him. He shook the memory away.

Stephen’s stomach began to turn inside him as he approached the office door. A doctor’s smell, something like cleaning solution and latex gloves, hit him as he opened it. God, I hate that smell.

The reception area was largely pink in a light, non-confrontational tone. Pale oak made up the principal furnishings. The women behind the counter eyed him quickly as he walked through the waiting room. Patients scattered around the room looked confused as he strode through, past worn magazines and flowery pictures. He continued through a door and into a hallway with exam rooms and a laboratory in the middle. On the walls
were pictures drawn in pastel, matted and framed: a pig behind a fence, a butterfly on a flower, and a sunset over a beach. *Elizabeth, she always was an artist. Younger sisters always a nuisance though. My favorite, that one.* He eyed carefully a picture of a songbird perched on a branch. *Reminds me of a place, that bend on the Little Blackfoot with the deep pool and the rock face.*

Passing the lab and exam rooms, he entered the office. A small stereo sat idle on an oak desk. Diplomas in frames and paintings of golf courses covered the walls: maroon wallpaper with trimmed with a border of dark blue. Inside the border were illustrations of golf clubs. *Remember when we moved and mom was picking out that wallpaper.*

*Asked what I thought. I liked the golf clubs. Sitting on the floor in the living room. In a corner of the room, a television rested on top of an old VCR. I remember that old thing from our house in Oklahoma.* The digital clock on the VCR flashed 12:00. *The man has a PhD, and he can’t set a clock. Wonder if it’s noon or midnight?* Stephen traced his father’s name on the doctorate, framed above the desk. *Wonder why I never noticed that VCR there.* A picture of their last family trip hung behind the desk. *Went to the Bahamas. So happy there. Funny how Mom and Dad aren’t next to each other.* On either side of us kids.

*What the fuck am I gonna say?*

The door handle clicked and Stephen jumped noticeably as the door opened. His father walked in and smiled, “What’s up?” *You fuckin asshole.* Stephen remained seated, turned his head back to the picture behind the desk.

“I think you should sit down,” he said slowly, after a pause. *Strength in your voice now.* As his dad walked around to the backside of the desk, Stephen looked to the
carpet. Mom picked that out too, sitting in our old living room. Hundreds of one inch carpet squares on cardboard.

Sensing something grave his father sat in silence while Stephen found words. “I talked to Mom today.” Looking up to see the effect of these words, he saw momentary horror swallowed up quickly. Slowly now. Maintain. “She knows some things. She doesn’t know what to do. I came here for her to get some answers, because it’s not fair for her or for—” No. All wrong. Try again. Figure out what’s going on. His dad shifted in his chair. “She believes you have an apartment, and that you are considering moving out.” He paused, reflecting on his own words. “Is it true?” Please dad, tell me it’s all wrong. Cmon dad. You’re better than this.

A clock ticked in the room as Stephen’s father stared at his desk. He began softly, “Well, Steve, it’s complicated.” Bullshit. I’m not eight fucking years old.

Outside the door, a woman called down the hall, “Helen, I need to get that ...”

“I just want to know what’s going on. So does she,” Stephen broke in. His father’s eyes went around the room, searching frantically. He’s looking for help. None here, dad. Just the truth now. Stephen’s foot rapidly tapped the floor.

“I do have an apartment. I’ve had it for about two months now. I don’t know why I got it, I...” he paused for a significant length. This is fucking ridiculous.

“Dad, you got it because you were gonna move out. Is there another reason?” That came out soft, like sympathy. As his father began to speak again, slowly, Stephen heard little. Yet he stared at the face of the man who had raised him, as if it were the first time he’d ever seen his dad. He studied the face, took in every contour, every laugh line, the bags under his eyes from the emergency operation the night before. He looks so
young. So young and so old. You can see the battle of age in his face. What’s going on in him? What’s going to happen to us?

Stephen interrupted his father’s words again. “What are you going to do?”

Again, the words trailed off softly, a tone near sympathy resonating in them. His father’s eyes settled on his desk, then directly into his son’s. For the first time in their conversation, they revealed no cowardice, no agitation, no fear at all; only honesty.

“I don’t know.”

October 11, 1999

Lying on his back in his room, Stephen heard a car pull up front. The weight of a childhood fell onto his chest, and he waited for the door to open. Dad. Here we go. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee...

Footsteps fell outside his door as Elizabeth skipped toward the stairs. The water heater clicked on and muffled the sound of her steps. I can’t take this shit... Stephen began to rise when he heard the front door open. Elizabeth must have met him at the door. She had to be right at the bottom. He reached the door to his room and opened it, walking slowly down the hallway and listening. A muffled voice drifted up the stairs, and Stephen recognized it as his father’s. God, I can’t hear.

A piercing scream cut the silence in the house. Jumping at the noise, Stephen stopped walking and stood in the hallway. Eyes closed, he lowered his head and paused. He’s leaving. Holy shit he’s gonna leave. Elizabeth screamed over and over, “No! No! You can’t Dad!” Who’s here? Just me, Mom, and Elizabeth. You’ve got to be the strong
one, Steve. You’ve—Heavy footsteps came from below, someone running to the stairs. Stephen looked up quickly with the sound. Mom. Ah fuck...

The sprint to the top of the stairs was merely a few feet. Turning the corner, Stephen found his sister halfway down the stairs. She still screamed, huddled in a lump against the wall. Her face gleamed red as she sobbed. Two steps from the bottom stood his father, trying desperately to speak to his youngest daughter. Where’s Mom? Around the edge of the stairs stood his mother, screaming at her husband. The words floated up to him as he rushed down the stairs. “Just get out! Just get out, goddamnit!”

Not looking at his father, Stephen swung around the banister and grabbed his mother. He hugged her and walked her away from her husband. Just get her away. She can’t be here. His mother collapsed into him, crying and screaming as he held her. The sobs broke up her words, choking her as she tried to breathe. “He’s leaving us! He’s leaving us!”

After his mother was around the corner, he went back for Elizabeth. She sobbed loudly, still halfway up the stairs where she’d collapsed. His father was now closer to her, but still three steps away. Stephen moved past his father and heard him speaking loudly over Elizabeth’s weeping, “Your mother and I just need some time apart. I need to be away for a while.” Bending down to pick her up, Stephen felt her grasp his neck with both arms. He lifted her and faced his father.

His father’s eyes were dry, but tired and red. They searched Stephen, for something they did not find. How could you do this? Stephen’s words were strong, but calm. “Go. Just go. You can’t explain it now. Not here.”
Jake looked at his children for a few moments, and said to them both, “I love you.” He turned slowly out the front door. Elizabeth began to scream as he walked away, and her fingernails dug into Stephen’s neck as he began to walk down the stairs. “Daddy no! Daddy don’t leave! Dad!” The door clicked softly shut.

Stephen walked to the couch and placed his sister upright on it. She stared at the floor, eyes red and distant. His eyes moved to his mother, who stood supported against a wall. Her hand covered her mouth, but her body shook as she cried. As he watched, her eyes dilated. They became dark and furious, and she stared through him and said, “I’m gonna drive off a cliff.” She began to run towards the garage. Stephen caught her halfway in the kitchen and held her tightly. She buried her face into his shoulder.

The feeling of his mother, shattered in his arms, stirred natural emotion in him. Stephen felt the tears rise and, immediately infuriated, fought until they were buried. What the fuck Steve! You gonna fuckin cry now? Let your mother die then. Watch her run out of the house because you’re gonna cry. The emotion subsided.

Eventually, Stephen placed his mother on the couch with his sister. Then he made a phone call to her best friend. After hanging up, he went back to the couch. They sat there, holding each other, until she arrived.

October 14, 1999

Stephen trotted down the stairs to the dark locker room. His footfalls on the concrete floor resonated in the dim room. Light poured in from a window looking in from the coaches’ office. Coach Sherman sat at a desk behind the glass. He browsed through a binder, searching for something.
Stephen cleared his throat at the cracked door and pushed it open.

Coach Sherman looked up, “Hey, something I can do for ya Steve?”

His fingers drummed a stack of papers in front of him. Stephen slowly walked into cramped office, looking down at his feet. *He’ll say yes. Just ask him. He’s gotta say yes.*

“Yeah coach, I, uh, I need to ask you something.”

His chair creaked as he leaned back to face Stephen.

“Sure, Steve. What’s up?”

Stephen scanned a row of pictures above the desk. One frame held a picture of Coach Sherman with his son, Kyle, at Utah State camp. They both held footballs, smiling into the camera lens. *Wonder if I’d gotten hurt yet?*

“Coach, my knee feels pretty good.” Doubt lowered his coach’s eyebrows as Stephen continued. “I know that I can’t get medical clearance, but I gotta play.”

His coach turned his head back to his desk, sitting up in his chair.

“Steve, I’d love to let you, but—”

“You don’t understand, Coach,” Stephen interrupted. “I need this.” Coach Sherman rubbed his temples with his fingertips. “Have you talked to my uncle lately? Has he told you what’s going on?” *Fuck that, Steve. Don’t make it about that. Just say you want to play.*

“Coach, my knee feels good. If I get hurt, I’m not gonna sue this team. My uncle coaches with you for cryin’ out loud.” A bell screamed just outside the office door, and Coach Sherman jumped slightly.

“Please, Coach. Just let me try,” Stephen pleaded.
A few football players pounded down the stairs and into the locker room. They talked loudly, changing for gym class. Coach Sherman reached back for his whistle and roll sheet.

"Get your pads from Coach Carter before practice."

October 18, 1999

Dark clouds gathered above the mountains to the west. A layer of snow already covered their slopes. The valley, brown and dead from the cold, awaited the storm. Cold air gusted by Stephen as he walked beside his sister. The worn trail up the mountain pressed between boulders and ponderosa pines.

Stephen looked back to see his house, below them a few hundred feet. *God, it still looks big from up here.* The tips of his sister’s blond hair flew in the wind under a stocking cap.

Erin, breathing hard from the climb, finally spoke. "Do you think it’s gonna snow?"

Frustration rose inside Stephen at the question. *If you wanted to ask me that, we could have stayed inside.* He caught his breath as he found an answer. *I’ve already been at practice today. What the hell are we doing out here?*

A sharp gust of wind took Stephen’s words out of his mouth as he spoke, then he tried again.

Erin walked on. Stephen waited for her to say something, but his patience shortened with the cold. They moved into a sheltered area among the trees, and he stopped her by grabbing her hand. Her blue eyes watched her feet, but her face grimaced.

"Erin, what's going on? It's freezing out here." She turned her back and moved toward a tree trunk, leaning against it. "What are we doing?"

Stephen tugged at a zipper on his coat. *It must be ten degrees out.* Throbbing pain beat inside his head. *God, I need some Advil or something.*

"How long did you know?" Erin asked, almost inaudibly.

Stephen began to ask, "Know what?" Something in her voice stopped him, and he looked up to see her crying. Her eyes turned turquoise, wet with tears. *I can't believe how much her eyes change when she cries.*

"About Dad? His apartment?" His voice soothed now, and he moved to her.

Her voice wavered, just about to break, as she responded.

"About his affairs, Steve. How long did you know?"

The question sounded like an accusation, and Stephen scrambled for an exit. *So I knew this summer, Erin. It wouldn't have helped to tell you. You were in college. You couldn't have done anything.*

"That's really not important, Erin, is it?" Stephen searched her for resignation on the point. *Just apologize for not telling her. Explain that you were trying to help.*

A shiver ran down Stephen's spine. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, Erin started.
“You know that trip I took to watch D.J.’s game my freshman year?” D.J.

*Freshman year, playing quarterback, that one game in Washington. Dad and her went to watch. I had a freshman game. Stayed home with Mom.*

“Yeah, I remember. You went with dad.” *What does this have to do with anything?* Erin began to sob, her mouth twisted as she tried to speak. *What the hell is going on? This shouldn’t be that important.* Stephen’s entire body went numb as he watched her weep. The answer rippled through him and his mind felt weak, like waking from anesthesia. *She knew. She knew about his affairs for three years.*

Stephen walked to his sister and wrapped his arms around her, rubbing her back as she cried. *I can’t believe she knew before me. Poor Erin. Was there anyone who didn’t fucking know?*

Words carried by Erin’s sobs formed half-thoughts. Stephen listened, trying to discern meaning.

“It was so hard, Steve. It was so hard. I wanted to tell you, I needed to tell someone, and I couldn’t—” Her sobs again covered her words completely.

*Fuck, dad. Conscience gets you and you tell your fucking kids? Makes cowards of us all. Couldn’t clean the spot off your soul, just show it to your kids.*

“Erin, I’m so sorry. I wish I could have helped you. I found out this summer.” Stephen continued to hold her, but her crying calmed with his voice.

“You knew too?” she asked, raising her turquoise eyes to meet his.

Stephen nodded. “He told me at Georgetown,” he said. *Why would he have told her? “How’d you two start talking about it?”*
Erin's nose scrunched as she sniffled from the tears. "We were talking about me and D.J. and whether we were going to get married." She started to walk back down the trail, and Stephen fell in beside her. "I told him that I wanted to marry him, and Dad started getting strange. He said, 'Whatever you do, no matter what, marry someone you can talk to—'"

Stephen stopped walking. A snowflake floated lazily down inches from him. Part of his soul insisted he cry, while another part insisted he shout in rage. Stephen looked to his sister, who waited for him and watched him silently. Unexpectedly, laughter tumbled from him. It grew louder and louder, until Stephen tilted his head back so the snowflakes landed on his cheeks and howled hysterically, tears forming in his eyes.

October 21, 1999

The sliding glass door opened to a dark kitchen. Stephen, shivering away the cold air, took his shoes off on a rug behind the door. The tiled floor creaked under his stocking feet. He walked with care, avoiding the countertops in the dark. Where is everyone? It's only 8 o'clock. Mom can't be sleeping already.

Around the corner a television flashed, the only light in the living room. A sectional couch sprawled in front of the entertainment center. Blankets piled at one end looked oddly human in shape, and they quivered as Stephen approached. Mom. Gosh, in the dark by herself. Hasn't heard me yet. Don't scare her. After pausing for a moment, he crept back through the kitchen to the door he entered through. Why are you doing this? You're going to scare her one way or the other.
The noise of the closing door filled the kitchen as he slammed it shut. He loudly walked back through the kitchen, and this time in the living room his mother peered back to see him entering.


A restrained response returned. "Hi. How was practice?"

*She's been crying. The quivering blankets. She was sobbing.*

"It went okay," he offered with a gentle tone. "This team we’re playing’s not very good, so it’s tough." *Cmon mom. You’re better than this.*

"I must have been sleeping when you came in," she said, testing how much he knew.

*Sleeping, mother, with kings and counselors.*

Stephen fell into the soft couch across from her. "How was your day?"

A Lifetime movie came back on the screen after an Advil commercial. She looked at the screen and handed him the remote.

"My day was fine. You can find sports or something, if you want."

*Why so polite?* "No, that’s all right. Thanks though." *My knee’s pretty sore.*

Stephen stood and walked back into the kitchen, opening a wooden cabinet door to an array of medicine bottles. After searching for Advil, he gave up and grabbed a bottle of rattling ibuprofen, a generic brand. Walking back into the living room, he swirled saliva in his mouth and threw the pills onto his tongue. Swallowing hard, one pill stuck in his throat and he coughed, pushing it back in his mouth. Frantically, he tried to
swallow as the pill dissolved, leaving a bitter taste in the back of his throat. Finally, the pill scraped down his throat. He sat back on the couch.

Within a few minutes Stephen gathered the plot of the low-budget movie. A father had deserted his wife and children, leaving the wife to work two jobs feed her kids. *Misery likes company.*

After just a few minutes of the movie, he heard his mother crying again in the dark. She stifled the sound, but couldn’t hide it completely. *Mom, what do you want me to do?* He crawled across the couch and sat next to her, sliding his arm around her trembling shoulders. She rested her head on his shoulder wiping away her tears.

After ten minutes in silence, she whispered something, not to Stephen, but as if he wasn’t there.

“I know I could’ve faked it. I could have kept it all together.”

*Break, heart, break.*

They stayed there, silent in the dark, until the movie finished.

October 22, 1999

The lights burned down on a frozen field. No stars were visible above the stadium; the lights bright glare cut them out. The players’ breath emerged as white fog from their facemasks. A ball snapped back to a holder. A thin player kicked it, and the ball sailed up into the dark and through the uprights.

The muscles in Stephen’s arms twitched as he bounced from foot to foot. The knee brace clicked softly as he worked his knee back and forth. Coach Sherman stood to his right, and he checked his watch and then the clock on the scoreboard. “All right men,
let's go in.” He began to jog off the field before turning back and yelling, “Seniors, stay out. Get in line. Come inside when you’re done.”

_Senior night. This is so fucking stupid. Just play the game._ Stephen jogged to midfield with a few other players. His mother stood alone on the forty yard line, waiting for him. _God that poor lady. She looks so scared. Where’s Dad?_ He found his father, talking to another father down the line. He was wearing a white Bruin jersey, the number nineteen in brown with gold trim.

He hugged his mother as soon as he got to her. _It’ll be fine._ “You okay?” he asked.

She didn’t speak, just nodded and pressed her lips together. _No you’re not._

“You’ll be fine,” he said into her ear, and squeezed her hand.

A woman’s voice crackled over the loudspeaker, much too loud, “Welcome to tonight’s match-up between the Missoula Hellgate Knights and your Capital High Bruins!” _This lady’s an idiot. Why can’t we get another person to work the P.A?_ “Please applaud for our class of graduating seniors in their last regular season football game at Vigilante Stadium.” The first athlete’s name was called. Stephen’s father finished his conversation and began to walk over to them. _Here we go. It’ll be over soon, Mom._

With his mother on the left, Stephen’s dad walked to his right side. Trying not to sound awkward, he said smiling, “Hey.”

_What the fuck are you so cheerful about?_

Stephen looked at him and forced a thin smile. “Hey.” He grabbed his mother’s hand and held it. They were only one player away now. They stepped forward in line
and faced the grandstand. A photographer aimed his camera at them and pressed the shutter with a brilliant white flash, once, twice. A purple smudge appeared in Stephen’s vision. A voice from the speakers, “Stephen McLeod.” *Goddamn, I can barely see.* They walked together toward the sideline from the hash mark. Applause from the stands died down, and they reached the edge of the field without saying a word. *All right. It’s over. Let’s play a football game.*

He quickly hugged his mother and looked in her eyes, peering through the purple blur. *She looks so scared.* “I love you. I’ll see you after the game.” He squeezed her hand as he turned to run to the locker room.

October 23, 1999

“Mom, I thought you did great,” Stephen said. He tapped his fingers nervously on the tabletop, a tell for his bluff. The crowded coffee shop reeked of coffee beans. The espresso machine hissed loudly. A young girl behind the counter yawned as she reached for a mug. Dark circles hung under her eyes.

Stephen studied his mother. *She has more lines in her face than I’ve ever seen before.* *God, she’s a wreck.* “I don’t know. It was so horrible seeing him and having to stand in front of all those people with him. I’m so sorry, Stephen, but I couldn’t even be happy for you in your game.”

Stephen sipped his coffee, and the drink scorched his tongue. *Damnit. Oh, shit, that hurt.* A drip spilled out of his mouth, and he rose to get a napkin.
“Well it’s over now, and you don’t have to do it again,” he said, walking back with a short stack of napkins. “Senior night is stupid anyway.” He tossed one to her and she whispered a thank you, inaudible under the din in the room.

They sat silent for a time, and Stephen continued to watch his mother’s face as she gazed past him. She looked at nothing, lost in thought.

Finally, she struggled through the words she’d been trying to find. “I was wondering, and it’s been bugging me for a long time, you know that morning I woke you up and told you your dad had an apartment?”

Stephen nodded while he sipped his drink.

“Well, you didn’t seem very surprised. It was like you already knew.”

Confusion lowered Stephen’s eyebrows slightly. “Well, yeah, I thought I told you that morning. Didn’t I—” His voice trailed away and he looked away from her, recollecting the conversation.

His mother pressed him. “You couldn’t have. Or at least I don’t remember. Did you know he was having— Did you know he was going to leave?”

She still can’t say ‘affair’. “No, I didn’t know he was going to leave. But he had told me that he’d had affairs before.” So casual, like you were speaking of someone else’s dad.

Now his mother looked confused. “When did he tell you?” Anger had begun to rise behind her words.

“He told me when we went to Georgetown this summer.” He took another small drink after he spoke.
Immediately her face flushed. Instantly furious, she fought to keep herself under control. When she spoke, her teeth almost clenched in rage. “He told you that he was having affairs when you went fishing at Georgetown, this summer?”

Calmly, curiously, he spoke, trying to subdue her emotion. “Well, sort of. He, he told me that he’d had affairs in the past. He never said anything about having one now, but that’s why I wasn’t surprised when you told me.” As he spoke, the passion left her face for sadness. Water gathered in the corners of her eyes. What is going on? Who cares if I knew?

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

She looked away before she spoke, out a dirty window onto the street. “Stephen, I asked him to take you on that trip. I wanted you to forget about your knee and be happy. I just wanted you to get away from your knee and football and all of it. And instead, he told you about his affairs. You were supposed to be happy. I just wanted you to be—” The sentence hung. She continued to stare out the window behind Stephen. A tear fell from her eye to her cheek, and she brushed it quickly away.

You were trying to save me. You were— Wait. How long have you...

“Mom, did you know that he was having an affair this summer?”

She turned slowly to face him, and looked straight into him. She spoke as someone does who’s just received horrible news over the telephone: detached, distant, but clear and understanding.

“Steve, I’ve known about his affairs for fifteen years.”
October 24, 1999

The brakes on the old Chevrolet pickup squealed as Joe slowed for a red light.

Stephen dug his fingers deep into Joe’s can of Copenhagen and pinched dark grains between his fingers. The light changed, and the pickup bounced down Eleventh Avenue as Stephen pushed the chew into his lip.

Behind the wheel, Joe stared straight down the road, waiting patiently for Stephen to begin. *He just wants to know what happened. I show up and just tell him, ‘I gotta get outta here.’*

“I just couldn’t take it anymore, Joe,” Stephen began, watching his friend’s reaction to his words. “She just can’t stop crying. Every fuckin night she cries and I hug her and tell her it’s all gonna be all right. I can’t fuckin take it.” His words were quick, angry, and passionate.

Joe pulled the truck onto an onramp for the interstate, heading south. The old engine whined as he increased speed. A neon sign outside Perkins cast his face in green as they passed.

“Honestly, Joe. I can’t be there and see her cry and tell her it’s all okay. Because it’s not fucking okay.” He paused, waiting to see if Joe would say anything, but his face did not move. He just stared at the road, listening. “The other day, my dad called. He asked my mom to let him come back, and she asked me what she should do.”

With this, Joe looked to Stephen with an expression of astonishment. He didn’t speak, but simply raised his eyebrows and blinked in surprise, asking, “Well, what did you say?”
“I told her she couldn’t let him come back. I told her that he left, and we just had to accept that, because I couldn’t see her go through that again. It was too hard.”

Stephen’s mind flashed to the scene at Georgetown Lake and his father’s dark face across the boat. *I should have done something then. I just fuckin hugged him. I let him think it was okay.* “Joe, all I could think was, ‘When I am a dad, where am I going to take my kids for Christmas? Whose house do I take them to, Mom or Dad’s?’ And I kept seeing my mom sitting by herself at my football games, not knowing if her husband was at work or with his lover. Because he’ll never change, Joe. He won’t ever change.” *I wonder if it’s genetic. I wonder if I’m the same way, and I’ll cheat on my wife.*

Stephen’s words began to slow. He struggled to find his thoughts, as the anger gave way to other emotions. “I can’t pretend it doesn’t hurt anymore. I can’t be the strong one, telling Mom it’s going to be all right. It does hurt. It’s not all right—” The door clicking shut behind his father flashed before his mind, and heat flooded his face. “I don’t know what Mom’s going to do, and I don’t know if Elizabeth will ever get over this—” Stephen felt Elizabeth’s fingernails digging into his neck as she screamed, and he felt the sobs rise to his voice as he screamed through his tears at the dashboard, “He fucking left us. I can’t believe he fucking left, Joe. He fucking left.”

Stephen sobbed and buried his face in his hands. He rocked himself back and forth. Joe drove with his left hand on the wheel, and reached over to rub Stephen’s back with his right hand. After a mile in this way, he said softly, over and over, “You’re all right. You’re all right.”
November 4, 1999

A bell rang as he opened the door to the café. The air was warm, stuffy, and noise from conversations bounced off the walls. Stephen walked past a sign, glancing at “Please Seat Yourself,” while he searched the faces at the tables. *Jeez it’s crowded. Should be, I guess. It is Sunday.* Finally he recognized a large man stuffed into a booth in the corner, gazing at a menu he knew by heart.

“Hey Grandpa,” Stephen said over the din in the restaurant.

“Stephen!” His blue eyes squinted behind thick glasses as he smiled. “Thanks so much for coming.” He wore a plaid collared shirt, tucked neatly over his belly into slacks. A soft glare shone off his bald scalp.

“Of course. Thanks for inviting me.” He slid into the booth and picked up a menu absently. The café had a train theme, and a black and white photograph of a railroad trestle hung above their table. The steep river canyon in the picture reminded Stephen of a fishing trip that he couldn’t place. *When was that, last summer? That water’s really flowing in that picture. Wonder if there’s trout in there. Right behind that boulder.*

An elderly waitress with dyed hair took their drink orders. The two made small conversation, talking about school, graduation, college, and the football season. Stephen asked about work, and his grandfather talked about an upcoming trip to Hawaii for a conference.

A busboy cleaned the booth directly behind Stephen. A glass tumbled from his hands and shattered on the tile floor. The crash quieted the café. Stephen turned and
watched the red-faced kid bent over, scurrying to pick up the shards. *Don’t worry kid.*

The roar resumed as he turned back around to face his grandpa.

They sat in silence for a few moments, studying each other. The old man spoke in a serious tone.

“How’s your mother?” he asked.

*Gets right to the point. Doesn’t ease into a topic does he?* “She’s good,” Stephen replied as he reached for his water, a nervous gesture. *I wonder if he really cares?*

“That’s good. Really, Stephen.” He leaned over the table as he spoke with sincere tenderness. “I’m proud of how you’ve handled this. I know it’s been hard, for you and your sisters, and especially your mother. She’s a great person.”

Stephen searched his grandfather’s face. *That’s genuine. No doubt.*

“Thanks, grandpa. That means a lot.”

Age lines emerged as the old man sighed heavily and leaned back, settling into his seat. His lips pressed together, as if he were in pain, before he began his next words.

“Your dad, Steve, he’ll always be my son. But I don’t always understand everything that my kids do.” He paused to study his grandson’s face. “Do you follow my meaning?”

Stephen nodded. *At least you don’t understand him either.*

“I’ve seen how you’ve handled this. I know it’s hard. I know how much your parents mean to you. And I know that you’d give up anything, even your football season just to see your parents back together again—” *No I wouldn’t.*

The thought came to Stephen before he could protest, before he could debate it in his mind. Almost immediately, guilt flooded him, and he fought to subdue its tide. *No. I*
I deserve this season. I deserve my teammates. After all I’ve been through. My knee. It’s not my fault my dad cheated. He struggled to suppress his conscience, but it began to overwhelm his reason. No. It’s not fair. My parents were going to break up. My mom’s better off without him. His grandpa continued to speak, and Stephen focused on his large, red nose. He recognized his father there, discovered his own likeness, and rebelled.

I deserve to be happy.

The words echoed in his cavernous mind. His thoughts flashed to a conversation with his father, on a boat at Georgetown Lake in the dark. The desperation in the statement rang like a church bell, eerie in its likeness to his father’s explanation for his sins.

Stephen’s grandfather took a sip of his water. He had asked a question, and was waiting for Stephen to respond.

Stephen looked into his grandfather’s eyes and could only see his father, akin to him through a bond that could not be broken. He saw the necessity of his resemblance to those sins, felt the immensity of selfishness inside him.

I’m just like him.

November 5, 1999

Afternoon football games produced a different atmosphere altogether. The emotion felt forced. With twenty-degree weather and sun shining, the day was perfect for football. The CMR Rustlers found themselves behind by fourteen points in the second quarter, and the Capital High Bruins appeared to be cruising to the championship game.
Stephen watched the first offensive play of the Bruins fourth series. The play, a run between the tackles, gained three yards to the Bruins twenty-four. Coach Sherman turned to find a receiver to run in the next play. “McLeod!” His yell produced a white cloud of vapor in the air.

Stephen hustled to the coach, who put his arm around his back as he told him the play. “Chief Doubles Left Ax, 29 Toss.” The arm behind Stephen’s back pushed him onto the field toward the quarterback.

A knot began in Stephen’s gut and his mouth went dry as he hustled the playcall to the quarterback. Justin Thomas listened to the call, and stepped back to the huddle. *Fuck. Don’t be nervous. Just get your block.* Joe Horne grabbed his hand in the huddle, and he found his offensive tackle’s hand reaching for his as well. *It’s like you’ve never been out here before. All right. First time today. First time in a playoff game. Get your block.*

The huddle broke with a clap, and Stephen lined up away from the play. Justin called the cadence, and tossed the ball to his running back around the left side. Stephen closed in on his blocking assignment, sprinting across the field to the ball carrier. He made contact, grabbed the defensive back’s numbers, and drove him back away from the play. A shrill whistle stopped the action, and Stephen stopped his feet and turned to walk to the sideline. *How many did we gain? Four?* The CMR defender put both hands into Stephen’s shoulder, catching him off balance. Trying to catch himself before falling, Stephen landed on his left foot, and felt a pop in his knee before it collapsed underneath him.
Shit. No. No, no, no. It didn’t happen. Pain shot like electricity up his leg, and he felt the piece of cartilage lodged inside the joint. No. Fuck this. He stood up, using only his right leg, and took one step toward the sideline. Putting weight on his left foot, screaming pain dropped him back to the ground. “Goddamnit!” he yelled. His uncle turned on the sideline and called for a trainer. “Steve! You all right?! Not now. Not in the playoffs. The team’s trainer spotted him and ran onto the field. We’re one game away. Not now. Fuck. Not now.

The trainer reached him and put Stephen’s arm around his shoulder as he supported him off the field. Stephen swung his left leg, putting no weight on it. I’m not going to play in the championship. It’s over for me.

November 8, 1999

The frozen practice field clicked under their cleats as they ran. The receivers stood in two lines, practicing stances and starts.

A position coach pushed them through their warm up routine. “All right men, loosen up now. Let’s go.”

Stephen stepped to the front of the line and fell into his stance. As he pushed off his bad leg, a streak of pain jolted through him. Bile filled his mouth as he slowed down, and he spat it out. The pain settled to a dull ache as he walked back to the line.

Sean McCullough turned to say something to Stephen, but stopped in mid-sentence. “Steve, you all right? You’re white as hell.”

“I’m fine,” Stephen returned.

Sean stepped to the hash mark and exploded forward on a whistle.
You’ll be fine. Just need to loosen it up. Stephen adjusted his knee brace, then stepped back up to the front of the line.

He drove forward, and on his third step felt his knee buckle under him. Pain washed red over his eyes, blinding him momentarily. He walked away from the drills to the track behind the sideline.

Goddamnit Steve. It’s not that bad. He walked along the track, shaking his leg every few steps. His knee brace clicked as he extended his leg, and the ache numbed his mind. Man, I’ve never felt it like this before.

He jogged back to the line of receivers. A sophomore in front of Stephen ran a lazy slant pattern, caught the ball, and turned up field. Stephen stepped to the line. His coach eyed him apprehensively. “Let’s go, Steve. Get better today.” Just go easy, Steve.

Stephen planted and looked for the ball, but again his vision blurred red as it approached. The pass cracked off his shoulder pads. Fuck Steve! This is fucking bullshit. Quit being such a goddamn pussy. Vision still blurry, Stephen picked the football off the ground and tossed it back to his coach. The ground trembled under him.

“Steve, just step out for a bit, man,” Sean spoke softly behind him. “Take a few off.”

Oh good. Now you’re winning sympathy you fuckin baby.

“I’m fine, Sean,” Stephen answered shortly.

His turn came again. Catch the fuckin ball, Steve. He pushed forward, planted, and found a fuzzy football sailing toward him. Stephen raised his hands to it and caught the ball, limping up the field as he tucked it away.
November 12, 1999

The training room was bright, bleached clean every evening and bathed in fluorescent lamps. The sterile, powdered smell of athletic tape and other supplies filled the room. Several football players sat on the tables in silence, waiting their turn to be taped. The head trainer worked on an ankle, wrapping tape around it with experienced ease. He was sweating terribly, and salty droplets poured down his face. Two attractive student trainers who wanted to be near the football players chatted nervously with the players they taped.

Stephen sat on a table in the corner of the room. The head trainer refused to tape him earlier in the week, as Stephen had not received a physician’s clearance to play. Now, Stephen used the room as an escape from the dark and silent locker room.

Sean McCullough sat next to him, barefoot, waiting to have his ankles taped. Together, they admired one of the trainers as she bent over to pick up a roll of tape, mercilessly gawking at her petite figure.

Sean leaned over to whisper in his friend’s ear. “Didn’t you do shit with her a while back?”

Stephen grinned with momentary pride. “Yeah, sophomore year. She looks better now, though.” A drunken evening at a house party, fumbling hands in a dark room and wet kisses on shaky skin, slipped through his mind. *Man, we were drunk. I don’t think we could have had sex if we’d tried.* The crudeness of the reflection struck him, and he watched her tear a strip of tape. *Who’s she dating now? Someone on the team I thought—*

“How’s your knee?” Sean asked.
“Fine,” Stephen replied. *It’s only gotta get through one night. It’ll be fine.*

At the sound of his friend’s voice, Stephen began to reflect on their friendship through the years. *First person I met, out at that basketball court in the park.* He tried to construct his friend’s face in third grade, but failed. *Walked to elementary school every day. And he was always late. Just off his steps and we’d hear the bell. Start to run, then walk after two blocks.* Stephen smiled as he dreamed. *We’d walk over to the gas station before school to get candy.* He pictured the huge man behind the counter at the store, with trimmed white beard and enormous hands. *That wasn’t so long ago, was it?*

The trainer called in their general direction that he would be right back, scurrying out the door to the bathroom across the hall.

“I’d better get out of here before he gets back,” Stephen said softly to his friend. “The old fucker will tell Coach I can’t play if he sees me in here.” He started to slide himself off the counter, but before he could touch the floor felt his knee pop. Cartilage wedged inside the joint, locking it in place. Stephen recognized the sensation. It felt as if his knee had dislocated. “Oh shit, Sean. Fuck.” *Shit, shit, shit.* If the trainer sees me I’m screwed. “Sean, you gotta hide me.”

Confused, Sean began to question before he looked at Stephen’s face. Recognizing terror and pain, he realized the situation. He called a couple other players over just as the trainer walked back into the room. They stood around Stephen, shielding him as he worked his knee back and forth with his hands, trying to free the cartilage.

“What happened, Steve?” Sean asked, his eyes wide with alarm. “You were just sitting there.”
“I don’t know, I just tried to get off the fucking counter. It should only take me a second to get it back in.” Stephen closed his eyes tightly as he extended his knee as far as it would go. His whole leg jerked once as the cartilage slid back out of the joint. Stephen sighed with relief. “There we go, it’s all good. Now I just gotta get outta here.”

He carefully slid off the table, landing on his good leg, and began to walk out gingerly. Sean shook his head, and settled back onto the counter.

“That was fucking disgusting, Steve.” Disbelief filled his words. He stared at Stephen’s knee and asked, “You’re not gonna play now, are you?”

Stephen faced his friend. “I’ve got one game left, that’s it. One more chance to be on that field with these guys.” A student trainer walked up to Sean and asked him a question with a smile, but his eyes never left Stephen’s.

A grin spread across Stephen’s face as he shrugged away the gravity of the moment. “I can’t give up now, Sean. I love it too much.”

November 12, 1999

Gloved hands pounded out muffled applause from the home stands. The cheers carried through frozen air to the sideline. The scoreboard lights flickered and relit, 1st and 10 for the Bruins.

Coach Sherman spoke casually into the headset. “What’d we get last first down? Cover Three?” He turned to find someone to run in the play, searching the faces of the players packed tightly around him. His eyes met Stephen’s, and he reached to grab his jersey.
As he pulled him onto the field, Coach Sherman pulled his headset off and forced Stephen to look directly into his eyes. “You ready?”

Stephen managed a nod.

A sly smile crept briefly across Sherman’s face, and quickly disappeared.

“Doubles Right 90. Catch it, and get your ass out of bounds. Don’t be a hero with that knee.” Oh fuck. A hand behind Stephen’s back pushed him onto the field.

_I’m getting the ball._ The Bruins’ quarterback, Justin Thomas, waited for the call at the hash mark. Stephen ran to him and told him the play. Justin’s eyes beamed behind his facemask. He winked at Stephen, and called the play in the huddle. Stephen lined up near the Bruins’ sideline.

Okay, just relax. Look the ball in. Cupping his frozen hands to his mouth, Stephen blew into them for warmth. Just look the ball in, Steve.

Justin approached the line of scrimmage and started calling the cadence.

Stephen’s eyes focused on the defender in front of him. Just before the snap, he started to backpedal into deep coverage. We’ve got it. He doesn’t have a chance.

Stephen pushed out of his stance and widened until he reached six yards. He turned and saw Justin release the ball. The ball spiraled directly into his hands, and Stephen felt the leather under thin gloves. He turned up field and gained four more yards before a defender pushed him out of bounds. Teammates crowded him as he turned to toss the ball to the referee. Slaps of encouragement pounded his helmet and shoulder pads. Stephen pushed through the throng of players, and as he looked onto the field saw a yellow flag lying on the grass at the line of scrimmage. Aw fuck. Stephen looked down the sideline to his coach, who stood shaking his head in mock frustration.
“Was it on me?” he yelled over the crowd.

Coach Sherman nodded. “Yeah it’s on you! You were two steps early!” he yelled back. His face broke into a smile as he turned away to call the next play.

Stephen looked down to the sideline at his feet. *Holy shit. I jumped offsides. This one chance, and I was offsides. It never fuckin ends.*

Joe, realizing who caught the ball, ran from his position at fullback to Steve on the sideline, meeting him facemask to facemask.

“How’d that feel, kid?” Laughter rolled from his lips as he pounded on Stephen’s helmet.

“Joe,” Stephen replied softly, “I was offsides.”

“Stephen,” Joe uttered, almost silently, “it doesn’t matter.” A smile again spread across his face. “Nice catch Mac!” Joe wheeled and ran back to the huddle as coaches screamed at him to get back on the field.

Stephen fought to catch his breath through a growing smile. His head felt light as he looked toward the scoreboard. The Bruins led 42 to 14 with 6:14 left in the third quarter. Down the sideline his uncle caught Stephen’s eye, and smiled broadly. *In an hour, it’ll all be over. We did it.*

November 23, 1999

A letter arrived a week after the championship. It remained unopened on Stephen’s nightstand for days until he finally put it in his pocket before walking out of the house.
Stephen hopped into his pickup and found the clutch with his left foot. The truck started to creep down the driveway as he turned the key. *What time was I supposed to meet Joe? 7:00?* He flipped on the lights and backed out. The clock on the dash read 6:52. *He can wait two minutes to get drunk. What's the date today? When do I have surgery? Must be next week.*

The back tires kicked gravel from the icy road as the truck flew toward Joe’s house. Almost there, Stephen pulled the truck to the side of the road and reached for the dome light.

The letter was creased from his pocket. His dad’s scrawled handwriting addressed Stephen on the front. The envelope bore letterhead from his office. *Fuck it.*

Stephen tore the envelope in a swift motion and pulled out the letter, written hastily in blue ink.

Stephen-

*I didn't get to see you after the game, but I wanted to tell you I was there. You did a great job, but I can't believe they let you play.*

*Congratulations on the state championship.*

*Grandpa and Grandma are having everyone up for Thanksgiving, in case you want to come.*

The mention of holidays stopped Stephen. He leaned his head back against the seat. *It's already started.* He raised the letter again.

*I wanted to make sure you knew you were welcome.*

*I'm so proud of you, Steve. I love you. I hope to see you soon.*

Love, Dad.
Stephen placed the letter back on the passenger seat. His fingers clenched around the steering wheel, white from the pressure. He breathed deeply, trying to control emotion, but rage took him and he pounded his right fist against the steering wheel.

You son of a bitch! Why can you be fuckin proud of me? I’m your son, goddamnit. And I can’t even be proud of my own dad. Thoughts of his grandfather’s living room filled with cousins from out of town and football on the big screen flooded his mind. Sorrow pushed his body into the seat of his pickup.

It’ll never be the same.

The truck grinded as Stephen forced the stick to first gear and punched the accelerator.

December 7, 1999

Applause in the banquet room died down as the man behind the microphone took a drink of water. The players were grouped in bunches at tables near the front, while the parents sat behind them, away from the podium. Stephen sat with a group of seniors at a table a few rows back. A white cloth covered the table, and brown and gold confetti littered its surface. Various gifts were piled in front of each player: pint glasses with “State Champions” printed on their sides, pictures from the championship game, and plaques for every senior with their name and number.

Stephen scanned the room without thinking, searching absently for his father. He found him in the corner of the room, checking his pager. Coach Sherman stepped back up to the microphone, and cleared his throat into it. Woops. “Well, we’re almost finished. We’ve gotten through all the seniors, and all of our awards that we’ve given
away in the past. Although the Offensive and Defensive MVP were difficult decisions, we knew that we had give one more award.” What's this about?

“This year, we decided to make up a new award, for a kid that deserved recognition. We're calling it the 'Coach's Award.' This young man, well— He has more heart than any person I've ever encountered. He would do absolutely anything for this team.” Fuck. There's no way. “This kid sacrificed a great deal to be a part of this team. It's funny, but it's players like him that I'll never forget. He wasn't All-Conference, but he would have given anything for his teammates. He ended up giving his left knee to be a part of this championship team, and we couldn't have this banquet if we didn't honor him tonight. It was selfless, coming to practice every night when he knew he wouldn't see the field. And so, Stephen, would you come up here please?”

Holy shit.

The applause around him felt like a buzz, something far away as he rose. A teammate at the table pushed his crutches to him. His face felt hot, flushed, and he tried desperately to keep the corners of his mouth from turning into a ridiculous smile. His head floated as he limped to the front of the room. Coach Sherman reached down and pulled a jersey from behind the podium. It was number nineteen, with McLeod screen-printed on the back. When he reached his coach, Stephen took his outstretched hand firmly.

“Thanks, Coach.”

“No, Steve. You deserve it. Where did you learn heart like that?”

Stephen laughed the question away, letting it hang as the applause died. He took his jersey from Coach and turned back to his seat. At the back of the banquet room his
mother sat with a few other parents. Tears of pride ran down her cheeks into her smile. His coach’s question repeated in his mind as he smiled to her. *I learned it from you, Mom. I learned heart from you.* Sitting back in his seat, Stephen thanked his friends as they congratulated him on his award, but his words were vacant. His eyes still lingered on his mother, as she wiped her eyes with the starched napkin from the table. *I thought I loved this game so much. I thought I loved it all so much. And I never knew. God, Mom, I’d have done something if I’d known. I wanted to be a part of this so much, I loved this game, this team,* Stephen scanned the faces of his teammates at his table. *They got me through this year. I watched these guys grow up. I blew my knee out four times to feel this love, this common dream achieved. For the love of a brother.*

A speaker had come to the microphone to congratulate the team, but stood too far away from it to be heard. A murmur stirred the crowd as they whispered questions to each other. “What did he say?” a friend asked at his table. At the table to his left, Stephen’s mother whispered something to the woman sitting beside her, who giggled quietly. *But it was you, Mom. I broke my leg for a group of friends. You died for us. Every day, for fifteen years, you died for me, for Elizabeth, for Erin. A husband that loved another, but you loved us unconditionally. You held it together, for us. You kept us alive. Through fifteen years of utter loneliness.*

An elderly priest walked gingerly to the microphone, his legs seemingly barely able to support him. Even from the back of the room, one could almost see the small droplets of spit upon his lips and smell his old odor. He spoke slowly. “To close our celebration, let us offer a prayer to the Lord.” *Mom lying in her bed at 3 a.m. alone, crying. “...And please help us, that we may recognize the love of your Son, Jesus.” And*
I remember her sitting at my football games by herself. How many times parents must have asked her, “Where’s your husband?” “That we may see his faith in us, that we may understand his selfless devotion to us sinners.” She would make excuses for him. “Oh, he had to work.” But she never knew if he was working or with someone else. “These young men selflessly gave their bodies and faith to the pursuit of a dream, yet Jesus selflessly gave his life for all of humanity.” That poor woman suffered through fifteen years for three children. She sacrificed everything for us. “Thank you for these gifts, and your goodness. Amen.”

The priest stepped down, and Coach Sherman took his place at the podium. “I’ve never felt that I had more I needed to say. This has been so special, so dear to me. But words are simply not acceptable in these moments, and I find that I can only say thank you.” Stephen’s uncle turned toward Stephen and winked. “This evening, this season, must end. But I will always cherish the memories, the love of these kids. Thank you, to all of you, for everything. That’s all we have, so drive home safe, and have a happy holiday season.”

Everyone stood up immediately to leave, smiling and shaking hands and putting on coats. Stephen remained seated, staring at the white tablecloth. Is it meaningless? She suffered so much. She wanted to save us, she wanted to save her family, and she failed. Stephen raised his eyes to the door as his father walked through it, throwing a coat over his shoulders. She loved so much, that now she is miserable. She loved despite herself, despite the pain it caused, so that she could protect us.

The other players at Stephen’s table had left, and Stephen sat alone. A soft hand pressed gently on his shoulder. He turned to find his mother, putting on her coat.
My God, I didn’t deserve this.

“You ready?” She smiled, the smile of a proud mother wanting to go home to an empty bed and three children.

“Yeah,” he smiled, and bent down to pick up his crutches, “let’s go.”