

Andy Rivera

The Ball Game

How can I tell you about my father? Can I tell you how I rolled over to pick up the ringing phone and heard my brother say “It’s Dad,” and how I thought he was joking, wished he was joking, but knew he wasn’t? And what would that tell you, other than that I don’t always believe my brother? Nothing, probably, but I got that call, and two days later I stood, staring into the canyon behind my parent’s house, my brother pressing a cold beer into the nape of my neck, my father gone.

I hadn’t been home in about two years, but nothing had really changed. The canyon was still there, still overgrown with dry brush, and the back door still screeched every time it was opened. That was how I knew my brother was coming, that and the crunch of his heavy tread on the cement. So I jumped when the bottle touched my neck, but I wasn’t surprised.

“Beer?” he said.

“Yeah,” I said, and I reached behind me for the bottle, not taking my eyes off the canyon. I was trying to find the tree we’d built a little fort in years before, and having no luck. John handed me the bottle and stayed behind me and to the right, so that he was a large gray blur in the corner of my eye.

“What are you looking for?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“Oh,” he said, and he moved up to the wall and stood next to me, loosening his tie in the process. “Where’s the stadium?”

“Dodger Stadium?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know,” I said, and then I pointed. “Over there, I think. That smudge of blue.”

“Yeah, I see it.”

We were both quiet for a couple of minutes, looking at nothing, sipping our beers, brothers that were strangers, really. I remember feeling guilty about being out there, away from the guests and their forced grief, and at the same time vaguely wishing that John would go away, and wishing that he would stay.

“Had you talked to him lately?” he said.

“No, you?”

“About a week ago. It’s hard to understand.”

“Yeah,” I said, undoing my own tie. “Do you remember building that fort down there? I can’t find the tree.”

“The fort?” John said, his beer half way to his mouth. “Yeah, I remember the fort. Do you remember all the Dodger games we went to?”

“Yeah, I remember Dad taking us to a few.”

“Do you remember when he caught that fly ball?”

“No,” I said, and I stole a quick sideways glance at John. His face told me he was well past his first beer.

“Man,” he said, “it was beautiful. We were sitting second level on the first base side, and I-forget-who came up and popped it right towards us. You and me, we had our gloves out, and there was the ball coming right at us and we froze, but Dad just kind of reached out and caught it. Don’t you remember?”

“No,” I said, but what I wanted to say was yes, because I did remember. I remembered looking through my glove, peanut shells crunching under my feet, as that little white pill flew at me, getting bigger all the time, and how my father stuck his arm out and just bare-handed that ball, and I remembered the smack of the leather on his palm and the smile on his face. But “It must have hurt” was all I said.

“Yeah, it must have,” my brother said as he leaned back against the wall, his face raised to the sun. “Why do you think he did it?”

“It was coming right at him,” I said. “It was reflex, self-protection. I’d do the same thing.”

John reached up and massaged the back of his neck. “I meant why did he kill himself?”

“Oh,” I said, and I should have said that is why, but instead I nudged John and pointed. “I think I see the fort-tree.”