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Kayla Jessop

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About a Catch

My father stands in the manicured grass on the side of the house in which I live and he visits. A Newport hangs from the corner of his mouth as he empties his calloused, paint-spotted hands of a bucket of fresh baseballs and two mitts: one small, pink, and one large, brown—all we need for a simple game of catch. He takes a long drag and coughs. He repeats this drag-cough routine as he stretches the mitt meant for me and puts it on my hand. “This way it fits like a glove,” he says, as the cigarette in the corner of his mouth bounces with each syllable. He does the same for his mitt and then punches his left fist into the center of it. Flicking the cigarette into the yard, he explains: “It’s simple: I throw, you catch, and throw it back to me.”

I run to the end of the house, face him and punch the palm of my glove as he did to his.

This is the first time I have seen my father in days. “At a doctor,” my grandmother—his mother—had said each time I asked where he’d been and why he hadn’t visited me recently. He looked happy when he came home—clean, buzzed brown hair, blue eyes, smiling. My father never smiled.

But he loved sports, especially baseball. I hate anything regarding dirt and sweat. He always said how much he wished I was born a boy so he could have someone to “throw a ball around with,” and yet, here we are. At ten years old, I’m not opposed to playing outside, but I’m not too thrilled to get dirt under my nails either. I only agreed to play after seeing the glove.

We start off simple, close together, tossing it back and forth; then we go further apart, throwing the ball a greater distance. After rounds of learning underhand throws, we take a short break, sitting in the grass, bodies pressed close together. At 25, my father looks like a boy: short and thin, a single strand of hair on his upper lip that glistens on his cherubic face; as if, when I was born, he stopped aging—stuck in a fifteen-year-old’s adolescent body. I watch my father take large sips from his gas station cup, my mouth watering with each glimpse.

“Can I have a sip of that?” I say.

“No. Go get a drink from in the house,” he says, scooting closer to me.

“But why not? I’m thirsty.”

“Because this is an adult drink. Kids can’t drink it,” he takes a long gulp from the cup as he positions himself on his knees, faces me, and puts his nose to mine, beginning our game of noses. A game we played on his good days.

“What’s an adult drink?”

A sweet odor escapes from his lips: “A drink for adults.”

The game ends as I scoot away from him, disappointed in his answer.

I don’t press the conversation anymore because instinctively, I know it isn’t my business. Then, our conversation is simple: How was school? How was the doctor? What is your grandmother making for dinner tonight? Our conversations are always this way, not only because of my young age but because my father doesn’t know how to talk to kids as my grandmother would say. His “grown-up talk” always received lectures from his mother.

He stands, lights and puts another cigarette to his lips, gulps more of his drink, and throws the ball as the smoke makes his eyes squint. The throws became harder and higher, and when I couldn’t—or maybe just didn’t want to catch the ball—my father would laugh. The more I didn’t catch the ball, the more he would laugh.

For all of my life, I have been used to seeing my father cry. He is the type of man one would call “sensitive,” but he doesn’t like to be referred to as such. He cries over everything, but more specifically when apologizing for his mistakes: constant stints in jail, then rehab, then disappearing, only to repeat the cycle. As a child, I didn’t understand what it meant to be so apologetic for everything. Later in life, I find myself apologizing for everything and anything. I too would grow up to be sensitive.

As the day came to an end, he would get sloppy throwing the ball and would give me a black eye. But right now, he takes another drag of the cigarette, throws the ball, and it lands right in my mitt.