

## Spring Training

The fly ball clipped the top of his mitt and plopped to the ground by his feet. For a second, the kid just stood there and stared at it, like he couldn't believe what had just happened. The runner half-heartedly rounded first. A boo echoed from the outfield stands. The taunt snapped the kid back to reality. He bent over, picked up the ball, and threw it back to the infield. An unforced error. His cheeks were bright red.

He was younger than her girls were, Helen realized. Big league contract or not, he was a kid. It never stopped being bizarre seeing professional athletes younger than her youngest.

The next batter stepped up to the plate, but Helen's eyes lingered on the kid in left field. He was tall and thin, couldn't have been older than twenty. From her seat along the third base line, Helen could see the shape of his sunglasses— neon-colored and name brand, in that ugly oversized style that the boys his age seemed to like. During warmups, jumping around between fly balls and waving to the crowd, he looked like a cocky little kid who didn't yet realize he was in over his head. But now that he'd dropped the ball his energy, his arrogance, was gone. He pulled the glasses off his face and cleaned them roughly with the fabric of his uniform. He took slow steps backwards until he shrunk into the shadows of the outfield wall.

Tom, Helen's brother in law, leaned over with a mean-looking smile. "Did you see that?" Tom wore a screen-printed Yankees jersey he'd overnighted from Amazon. "What a stupid play." Tom was nearly seventy but wore the type of cologne they marketed to fifteen-year-olds. In his arms was a soggy bucket of bright-yellow ballpark popcorn. He held it out as an offering.

Lois, Helen's sister, grabbed a handful. "Oh, don't be such an ass," she said. "He looks so embarrassed." Compared to Tom, Lois was dressed

humbly, in a crew-neck sweater and worn Levi's that she barely filled out. Even her voice was less conspicuous. Her white-blond hair floated in the wind, disappeared in the sun.

Tom shrugged. "He should be! I could've caught that." He put his hands in the air, pantomimed a pop fly. The family in the row in front of them turned around, looking less irritated than embarrassed. Tom paid them no mind. "Cocky bastard. Did you see him warming up? Dancing around like an idiot, throwing balls behind his back, yelling to the crowd. And then he drops the first fly ball that comes his way." Tom shook his head. "These fucking kids, man."

"He's still a better athlete than you, fatty," said Lois, smiling. She reached out and pinched Tom in his beer belly. He yelped, tried to squirm out of her grip, and bent the entire row of stadium seats backwards with his weight.

"He looks so young," said Helen. "He must be, what? Like eighteen?"

Lois and Tom turned to Helen half-startled, as if they'd forgotten she was there. Helen sighed, slinked back in her seat. That sort of thing was happening more and more often. Especially since the divorce, traveling alone.

"What?" said Tom. "You got a little crush? Worried if he's legal?" He looked over his shoulder, to the stands around them, for a laugh.

"You're disgusting, Tom," said Lois, for Helen's sake. But she couldn't hide her grin.

Helen tried to ignore them, to focus back on the game. The kid was still in left field, but where once he was tall and fluid, bobbing back and forth on the balls of his feet with each pitch, now he was rigid, eyes glued forward. It was the bottom of the second, two outs. The dropped pop fly was the only exciting thing to have happened in the game. Tom and Lois fidgeted in their seats as the pitcher stepped up to the mound, wound up, paused, then released. Their eyes were on the jumbotron, the blown-up version of the action, instead of the real thing. The runner on first stretched his arms and said something that made the fielder next to him smile. Lois yawned. The loudspeakers shuffled through fifteen-second soundbites of reggaeton.

A strikeout later, the fielders scurried back to their dugouts. The low Florida sun cast long shadows under their feet. They looked like they were floating, walking on air. The score was still zero-zero. The kid's error was

nothing but a checkmark on his stats sheet.

Still, Helen noticed he kept some distance between himself and the rest of his teammates as they filed inside. His eyes were lowered on the dirt in front of him.

“I’m going to go get a beer,” said Tom.

“You just sat down!” said Lois, but Tom was already climbing the concrete steps to the concourse. Lois crossed her arms, irritated. Helen was just glad for a few minutes without Tom.

“Are you having fun?” Helen asked.

“I don’t know how you watch this all the time. Nothing happens!” Lois gestured out to the field, where the fielding coaches threw mock flyballs in sleepy arcs through the air.

“That’s kind of the point,” said Helen.

“You’re nuts,” said Lois, and then laid her head on Helen’s shoulder. “Absolutely nuts.”

The leadoff batter stepped out of the dugout. “Look who it is!” said Lois. “Your boy!”

“Very funny,” said Helen, but Lois was right. It was the kid from left field, timing his practice swings with the pitcher’s warmup throws.

“You know, I don’t blame you,” said Lois. “Look at those arms. Did twenty-year-olds look like that when we were twenty? I don’t think so.”

“We were just hanging out with the wrong people,” said Helen. She was smiling, too. Lois didn’t know much about baseball, but she didn’t seem impressed by the roster of second-stringers, has-beens, and rookies that came out for the first half of spring training. Helen had tried to explain that these were development games, chances for kids from the minors to get a feel for things, but Lois didn’t care. To her, it was all frustratingly slow. Where they’d grown up in rural Illinois, it had been all football all the time. It was only after moving to New York that Helen realized people even watched baseball, let alone liked it. Lois still wasn’t convinced.

The kid stepped up to bat. Helen held her breath as he used his bat to knock the mud off his cleats. All his energy from earlier was gone. He faced the pitcher standing upright with a blank face, like a child about to be punished.

The first pitch came in impossibly fast. He swung late, tipped it backwards into the net. The next pitch was inside. He jumped out of the batter's box to avoid it, but the umpire called it a strike. From his too-tight stance, Helen could tell the kid was flustered. Lois was right, he looked strong—chest and shoulders practically popping out of his uniform. But he seemed to be leaning back as the pitches came in, wincing. The third pitch was fast and low. He didn't even swing. The umpire called strike three.

Tom came back with a half-finished beer. Lois, bored, checked her email. Helen watched the kid walk back to the dugout, eyes again on the dirt. The game kept going.

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Tom and Lois's condo was the only one in their gated community with a lot that bordered the water. Helen didn't like their development. The rest of the neighborhood was claustrophobic and gray, full of unfinished foundations with gravel yards. There were no trees, only skinny little saplings held up by rope. You needed to scan an ID card to get let through the front gate.

But even Helen was moved by the water. It was gulf, technically, not ocean. Not that Helen could tell the difference. She and Lois spent each morning on the little coarse-sanded beach in the backyard, sipping tiny cups of homebrewed espresso and reading the women's magazines that Lois still subscribed to after all these years. Back in the house, Tom spent his mornings pounding away on the Peloton or one of his other big, expensive exercise toys. Helen found it much better, for everyone's sake, to be outside.

The condo was so much colder, uglier, less homey than the old parlor-style mansion that Lois and Tom had in Nashville. It was owned by Tom's hospital, a holdover from a different era, when hospitals would still provide housing for their star doctors. But when Tom retired, they'd had to empty out the house. Helen had gone down to Nashville to help with the move. It was eerie seeing the familiar rooms suddenly absent of Lois's imported furniture and magazine-spread of a kitchen. After the better part of thirty years, Helen had come to see the house and all its expensive

clutter as just another limb of her sister. She could hardly have imagined Lois anywhere else.

But now, in Florida, Lois was a totally different person. Their condo was thirty minutes from Tampa, ten minutes from the nearest Target, but she lived almost totally unplugged. Everything that had dictated the shape of Lois's days in Nashville—the tennis clubs, the school boards, the endless drama in her always-growing women's group—was suddenly gone. Now all Lois wanted to do was lie on the beach and read. She gained ten pounds that she probably always needed and left her cell phone face down on the kitchen counter for days at a time.

And, if the coy comments Lois kept making were to be believed, her and Tom's sex life was having something of a comeback, too. Which to Helen, sounded like something out of her magazines—“Sex after sixty!”—and not real life. But maybe in Florida real life and magazine stories really weren't so different.

“Look at this,” said Lois. She held up a *Cosmopolitan* that was already three weeks old. It was a profile of an actor that they'd obsessed over as teenagers. He was having a late career comeback—a supporting role in a superhero movie, a memoir, a new wife half his age.

“Gross,” said Helen.

“His face looks so fake, right?” Lois pulled the page back for a second look. “He must've cheated out on the surgery.

Helen smiled. The way Lois, smarter than Helen had ever been, could unabashedly immerse herself in tabloid trash-talk never ceased to amaze her. Helen was so out of touch with the things that, in their twenties, they'd thought were so important. She hadn't even realized they were still printing *Cosmo*.

The sunrise was on their backs, light catching the gloss of the magazine paper. In front of them, the ocean was long and wide and colored a washed-out blue. The rumble of the waves was so constant, so low, that Helen tuned it out. She wore athletic shorts and a pullover she'd stolen from Tom. It smelled like the expensive detergent Lois used. Her feet, sandals kicked to the side, were buried in sand.

“No game today,” said Lois. “What do you want to do instead?”

"This," said Helen. "No, not even this. I want to do nothing."

"Deal," said Lois.

"You think Tom's gonna like that?"

"Fuck Tom," said Lois. "I entertain him all day, every day. For once, my sister comes to visit. Today, I'm yours."

"I'm not sure I've ever seen you actually relax before," said Helen.

"I'm not sure I've ever seen you relax," said Lois.

"There must be something in the air here," said Helen. "Fluoride, maybe."

"Sea salt."

"Bird shit."

"Definitely bird shit." They giggled and stared at the water. A gull circled overhead.

After a while, Lois broke the silence. "It's nice having you around, Helen. Really nice. I think you should stay a while. More than just a week."

Helen sat up, laid her magazine open on her lap. "I don't know, Lois. I can be a pretty bad roommate. I'm messy, loud...."

Lois's tone got sharp. "I'm not joking, Helen. Why not? You're already here."

"And I'm not joking either. Why are you trying to start this fight again? I'm here for vacation. To see you. And watch baseball. Not to set up base camp in your guest room. Not to be the spinster aunt while you and Tom make out in the pantry."

Lois ignored the last part. "There's baseball here year round, you know."

"The Rays? Ew." Helen looked at the water.

"Can you not be a smart ass for one minute? I'm trying to be serious with you."

"And *I* can't be serious about another AL East team," said Helen.

Lois groaned. She kicked her feet back up onto her beach chair and grabbed her magazine, pretending to read. Helen did the same. The ocean filled the silence between them.

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The next day, Tom had plans to golf with an old friend from medical school,

so it was Lois's job to drive into Tampa for the game. She was almost as nervous behind the wheel of Tom's massive SUV as Helen was in the passenger seat. When, after twenty-five minutes of stop and go traffic punctuated with shrill whispers, they finally made it to the stadium parking lot, they laughed, giddy with relief.

The game was delayed forty-five minutes for a storm that hadn't even started yet. That was just the weather in Tampa. There was enough electricity in the air that the hair on Helen's arms stood up, but she could see nothing but blue skies in every direction. The air was soupy and gross, thick enough to discolor the world.

She and Lois sat in pleasant silence, watching the stadium slowly fill. With a thunderstorm rolling in and not a single starter playing, Helen worried the game was a waste of time. She felt bad for dragging Lois all the way out to the city. But if not exactly thrilled, Lois seemed fine. She'd learned from the last game and brought a magazine to flip through.

Music played from the stadium loudspeakers, a playful organ riff that seemed to be teasing them, elevator music for the forty minute delay. Lois yawned.

"Are you looking forward to going home?" Lois asked. Helen chose to ignore the implication in her words. It was too nice out, too sunny, to get bogged down by another useless argument.

"I hate flying," said Helen. "I haven't even gotten sick from the first flight yet. When I get back home, I'll probably have two colds at once."

Lois whacked her with the magazine and smiled. "You can find anything to complain about," she said. "Just like Mom."

"For the sake of keeping the peace, I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that." Helen tried to keep her voice bubbly like Lois's, but she felt suddenly uneasy. Maybe it was just the humidity.

"I haven't gotten a chance to ask you," said Lois. "How has it been packing up the house?"

Helen shrugged. "Horrible. Heart wrenching. Back wrenching. Just like when you guys left Nashville. At least I only have two stories, not three."

"At least...." said Lois.

Helen frowned. She hadn't intended her words to come off as icy as

they did. She tried to think of something Lois would want to hear. “It does get lonely, though. Up there all myself.”

“I wish I could be lonely,” said Lois. “Lonely is good, sometimes. At least I imagine it would be. Finally, some fucking peace and quiet.” She leaned back in her stadium chair, seeming all of a sudden smug. For what, Helen wondered. Her asshole husband whose flaws she refused to see? For the beach in her backyard? As fucked up as the last couple years of Helen’s life had been, at least her kids still wanted to talk to her. Helen almost said so.

“Lonely or not, I think downsizing is good. An apartment has less surface area to worry about. You know, for dusting and all that.” Helen paused. “I do sound like Mom....”

Lois mumbled something Helen could make out and buried her face in her magazine.

After a while, the delay ended, and the players came out onto the field. The kid in left field was back. Helen clapped as he jogged past their section, ignoring Lois’s sideways looks. In the outfield, the kid adjusted his hat and glasses with the sun. There was stubble on his cheeks that hadn’t been there the game before. Someone came out of the dugout—a batting coach, maybe —and the two of them played catch. Helen was surprised by how natural the kid looked. Last game’s nerves were completely gone. His arm swung wide and long. His throws looked effortless. His uniform was wet and clung to his shoulders, revealing muscles that Helen hadn’t noticed the day before. She made herself not stare. On the ride into Tampa, Helen had looked up the kid online, read up on his history and his stats. He was from Arkansas or Missouri or one of those other nowhere Midwest states. Just like Helen. He’d skipped college for a signing bonus with the Yankees and spent the last year in Double A doing absolutely nothing. The one blog she’d read had called him a waste of a million bucks.

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The spots bar was lifeless, all plastic chairs and exposed stainless steel beams. Expensive food served already cold. But Helen couldn’t complain. She’d picked the place out herself, found it on Google Maps during the



seventh inning stretch when the rain finally came in and the announcer said it'd be at least an hour before play resumed. Helen could tell Lois didn't want to wait, so she'd suggested somewhere they could catch the end of the game on TV. Somewhere with drinks.

What she hadn't anticipated was being smushed boy-girl-boy-girl at a high-top table with two greying men that Helen, reluctantly, recognized as age-appropriate.

James, the loud one, was talking about the medical practice he'd founded and recently sold. "It's the big healthcare conglomerates," he said. "They're pricing all the little guys out. At least I was established and burnt out enough that taking the payout was worth it. But for these kids, man, I don't know." He shook his head.

"Oh, I know what you mean," said Lois. "My husband was a doctor, too."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that." James's solemnity was gone, replaced by a flirty smirk.

Lois said nothing but smiled knowingly. Sometimes, Helen had no idea what was going on in her sister's head.

For the sake of the conversation, Helen turned to the shy-looking one, Andrew. "And what is it that you did? I mean, do?"

Andrew laughed nervously. "I.T.," he said. "Mostly network maintenance." And then, at Helen's apparently visible lack of interest, added, "I retired last year."

"Well, good for you," said Helen. She had no idea how Lois did it, feigned—or didn't have to feign?—sincere interest in the life stories of total strangers. She'd had been that way since they were kids, talking to old aunts and second cousins while Helen smiled by her side.

And since the divorce, Lois channeled her outgoingness into making Helen talk to men. These two were healthy and wealthy looking, Helen supposed, but also hopelessly boring. They'd come to the bar from the rain delay, too. They'd been sitting a few tables over, Yankees caps still on, and Lois waved them over. Helen had hissed at Lois to shut up, kicked her under the table, but soon enough the men were pulling up chairs, ordering a pitcher of light beer, and Helen was on the hook to talk for at least a pint. Helen glared at Lois, not caring if the men could see. Lois pretended

not to notice.

“And that’s how you ended up in Florida?” Lois was asking.

“More or less,” he said with a smile. “And you guys? You’re from New York, too?”

“I’m not,” said Lois. “Helen and I grew up in Illinois. I went south for school, she went to New York.” She leaned forward and exaggerated a whisper. “It was for a boy.”

James laughed, then nudged Andrew in a way that Helen didn’t like. “Oh yeah, and how did that work out?”

“Alright,” said Helen, suddenly defensive. “We drank, argued, watched a lot of TV.” James and Andrew were staring blankly, so she kept going. “He was a salesman, though not particularly good at it. We’re separated, now.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said James.

“I’m divorced, too,” said Andrew, stupidly.

“It’s okay,” said Helen, with false enthusiasm. “I got two great kids out of it. And an unhealthy obsession with these assholes.” She tapped the Yankees logo over her heart.

“Well, we can drink to that,” said James. He poured out the rest of the pitcher.

After that, Lois seized back the conversation. Helen was happy to let her. Lois asked the men some uninteresting, thoughtful questions and Helen’s mind was free to wander. The floor beneath her feet was sticky. Despite the furniture, the room smelled like any old sports bar, like french fries and stale beer. It reminded Helen of the nights, a lifetime ago, she’d spent in basement bars in Albany with Michael and his friends from school. A rotating cast of friends and exes, everyone dating each other, screaming at the Yankees or Mets or Jets or Bills or whoever had the misfortune of being on TV that night. Everything sped up, intensified, by the free-flowing, four-dollar pitchers of Pabst. Before Kate and Kelly were even ideas in Helen’s head.

On the TV, play had unceremoniously resumed. Lois and the two men kept talking, not caring enough to watch, and then it was two outs, nobody on base. The kid from left field stepped again up to the plate. His eyes looked tired. He let the first two pitches fly by without moving a muscle.

The rain picked up, dark and heavy enough that it was hard to follow the ball. The rain was the worst it'd been all day, but no one stepped up to stop the game. They wanted it over with.

Helen lost the third pitch into the blur of the falling rain, but the crack of the bat was loud enough she could hear it over the crowded bar. The kid took off toward first. The camera cut to the sky, tracking the ball, losing it in the rain, then finding it again. It was high in the air. Too high, Helen thought. The camera followed its descent. Helen grabbed the edge of the table. It fell, it fell, it fell, looked like it was going over the fence, maybe, and landed ten feet too short. Right into the center fielder's glove. The camera panned as he jogged back to the dugout, out of the rain.

The bartender changed the channel to SportsCenter. Helen turned back to the table, the real world. Lois was half laughing at some dirty joke James had made. Andrew, the one Helen understood that she was supposed to flirt with, looked like he wanted to go home, too. Back at the stadium, off camera, the kid was probably still rounding the bases.

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On Helen's last full day in Florida, Tom got pulled over on the highway to Tampa. Helen watched from the backseat as he rolled down his window and greeted the trooper like an old drinking buddy. He handed over a laminated police benevolence card with his ID and grinned like an idiot. In the passenger seat, Lois shook her head. The cop came back with a full ticket—eighty-eight in a sixty-five. Almost three hundred bucks.

Even a half hour later, pulling into the stadium's parking lot, Tom was in a mood. He snapped at the kid working the ticket window and walked to their seats a half-dozen paces ahead of Helen and Lois.

"Is he always such a baby?" Helen asked.

Lois glared at her. "Seriously?" she said. Tom's tantrum had dragged Lois into a bad mood, too. Sometimes it amazed Helen that she was the divorced one, not Lois. That after all those ridiculous fights, the late-night phone calls, the sudden "visits" where Lois would stay in Albany for weeks at a time, it was Michael living in some dumpy apartment, not Tom. That

it was Helen packing up the big old house she'd raised kids in all by herself while Tom's pension paid for Lois's condo.

The grass in the outfield in front of them looked dead, overwatered. But otherwise, the weather was spectacular—blue skies in every direction, the air warm but not hot. An actually full stadium for the first time all week. The three of them watched the game in close to silence. Nearly three hours, with great pitching, a dozen hits, and even a few big-names coming in to play at the end. Helen's stomach grumbled but she kept her mouth shut. Her wallet was tucked away in Lois's purse. And Lois did not seem like she was in the mood to talk.

The kid didn't play. Helen checked left field, the other positions, the jumbotron, even tried to peek into the dugout, but it didn't seem like he was even in the stadium. In his place was a man probably twice his age, a Golden Glove from ten years ago with the Rockies or Athletics or some other team Helen didn't care about enough to remember. He'd signed with the Yankees after two years on the DL, surgery and a drawn-out rehab. The crowd cheered when he stepped up to the plate. They even cheered when he struck out. He moved slowly, though faster than Helen would've expected, given the size of his belly. Chubby or not, it didn't matter. He caught every fly ball that came his way.

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That night, Tom and Lois fought. Within a minute of walking through the condo's front door, both of their voices had raised to yells, fingers were being pointed, doors were slammed. Helen had no idea what had started it. She also knew it didn't matter. Tom, as always, retreated to the basement, full of his computers and workout equipment and big-screen TVs.

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glass.

Helen watched Lois. She knew she was supposed to go to her, sit with her, talk about it. **But** for once, she didn't. She went outside. Inside the condo, the air was stuffy and hostile. Outside, it was warm. After all these years, Helen could see the shape of the night that Lois expected of her—the two of them would split the bottle of wine, talk cryptically about their messed-up marriages, and fall asleep watching bad TV. Tom would wake her up on the living room couch at five in the morning and drive her to the airport. He'd kiss her on the cheek outside the terminal and wait for her to round the corner to security before driving home. And that would be that. They'd done it before. Helen couldn't do it again.

If the silence inside was toxic, the silence of the neighborhood, the ocean somewhere in the distance, was wide-open and welcoming. Helen walked along the side of the condo to the backyard, to the tiny, fenced off beach. She breathed in the salty air. It scratched the inside of her throat like a cigarette. She felt energized. Somewhere behind her were the chummy sounds of a barbecue Lois and Tom weren't invited to, the mechanical crunch of a dump truck dropping off soil. But as she approached the shore, the crash of waves drowned it all out. The non-rhythm of it calmed Helen down.

The neighborhood, the development, the *community*, whatever the hell Lois and Tom wanted to call it, was stifling. The sand reminded her of something else. She kicked her sandals off, ignored the creak in her knees, and lowered herself to the ground. Her entire field of vision was ocean, all of everybody else's bullshit in the rear-view mirror. She kept her mind on the waves. In a roundabout yet very real way, these were the same waves she saw in Albany, walking the river path along the Hudson. They were the same waves Kelly saw in the city and that Kate drove by on her commute to DC. Wherever the hell he was, Michael probably saw them, too.

Helen's mind wandered back to baseball, to the kid in left field. The crack of bats rang in her head like a steel drum banging out a summery song. She imagined the kid packed onto some Greyhound heading north, back to the bush leagues. Replaying the image of his error, the dropped flyball, over and over in his head.

Or maybe he was thinking of his last at bat. Of the sensation of contact. Of vibrations in his wrists. Of dropping the bat and of running. Of rounding first base, one eye in the sky. Of his ball climbing and climbing and climbing, then falling and falling and falling. Of the unmistakable snap of leather on leather. Of just another prospect who didn't pan out. Of a million dollars down the drain.