

On Such a Big Day

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They slap your helmet, your back, your butt. They just want a piece of you.

It's deafening. The roars from the crowds, the band letting the drum line take control, the speeches from the coaches. This is state, goddammit, The State Championship, in the greatest state in the world. They scream. Their voices are hoarse from the pep rallies and practices all week, yet they still manage to make themselves heard, the clipped and terse accents of North Texas never wavering. This is not a show.

Yet you are the star. Girls walked by your locker all week, winking, wishing you luck, promising to cheer loud and wait for you after you win to congratulate you. They wink again. You know they are promising sex. You smile, but you will not see them after the game. You do not give up your body so easily. The tight skirts and the foundation caked on; the eyelashes weighted down with mascara, clumped and curled may excite someone younger, less experienced, someone without his eyes on the prize. But that is not you. That has never been you. The only kiss you want after the game is the cold metal of a trophy, a trophy lips from Steinbeck, Texas, were never supposed to kiss.

State. State. State. State. State. State.

The only preface to any conversation that week, that month, really. Said with a drop of the jaw, an elongation of the 'a' and a finality of the 't' that made little droplets of spit shoot between everyone's teeth. Spittle flew everywhere, from every direction: the hallways, the diners, the Sunday Suppers at Grandma's, church on Monday or Wednesday, Saturday or Sunday.

The Steinbeck 'Stangs were going to State.

Fiction

Mom makes you a big breakfast before school today. Friday mornings. She fusses over your hair and tells you to eat more. I'm not hungry, you try to say. But your throat is dry, cracked, your stomach is tight and fluttering, your jaw is clenched, so you just grunt and try to stuff toast into the line that used to be your mouth.

Your dad does the crossword puzzle without saying anything. He sips his coffee too loud in an attempt to keep his mouth from burning. This bothers you, but you don't say anything. You tap your fingers on the table instead, visualizing the field. Running through the plays. You wonder if Roberts will be able to handle the pitch on the option. If Daniels will run the corner, not the post, when y'all are on the twenty. He had trouble with that in practice. You didn't. You hit them all, every play. You've never been better. You are excellent.

The phone rings. Your dad looks up from the crossword, and your mom bustles from the table to answer it.

- Hello, yes, he's right here! No need to leave a message, I'll put him on right away.

She walks over, and hands the phone to you.

You think that no good news comes over the phone this early, but you thank your mom and take the phone. You walk into the living room.

- Hello?

- Hey there, this is Coach Redford, from the University.

- Oh. Hello!

- Sorry to call you so early. And on such a big day! I thought you might be in Dallas by now. I was hoping to catch your machine. Leave a message.

- We leave at 11, sir.

- Pep rally before you go?

Fiction

-Yes sir.

- Well, that's good. Nothing changes.

- I guess not, sir.

- Well, I hate to call you so early. Really was hoping to catch your machine.

- Yes sir, that's alright sir.

- Anyway.

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- Well, so, since I've got you now, really was hoping to catch the machine, and you know, talk to you after the game, but I'll go ahead and tell you, and I'm sorry to have to tell you this, on such a big day and all, but you see, the thing is, A&M's QB recruit de-committed yesterday—big guy, strong arm, fast—and he's shown some interest in us, and, well, you know how it goes, we pushed real hard for him and it's looking like he'll come our way, but the thing is we'll have one too many quarterbacks with the two of you on the roster, and well, as of right now this guy's gonna be a better fit for our program and, well, but we're looking to get this kid to sign today, so I called, on such a big day, I know, to tell you, uh, we won't be able to offer you a scholarship to play ball here, and I know we talked about it and made verbal commitments, but it's not looking like we'll be able to make anything official.

- Oh.

- But you can go to JuCo, play there for a while, and come play for us when we've got more room.

- Okay.

- Academics aren't great, but that's not why you're going anyway. Ha ha.

- Right, sir.

Fiction

- Yep, well, believe me, we are sorry this isn't able to work out. Really wished I could have caught your machine.

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- And on such short notice, too, and on such a big day! But, well, anyway, thanks for taking the time to talk, I'm sure you're busy prepping for the game. Some of our staff will be out there, if you wanna give 'em a good show, make 'em see what we're missing. Ha ha ha.

- Ha.

- Well.

- Yep, sir, thank you.

- Good luck today, son.

- Thank you, sir.

- Take care now.

You stare at the phone after the line goes dead. You look at yourself in the mirror to make sure nothing has changed. Your eyes are still blue, your nose is still broken, your cheeks are still pocked with perpetual acne from your helmet and sweat mixing every goddamn day for the last eight years. You look down, and your hands are steady. Even when you've lost everything, at least you've got that.

Your mom asks what Coach R. wanted. You tell her he wanted to wish you good luck, to throw five hundred yards.

You put your plate in the dishwasher. Your dad looks up from his crossword. He sees you and you swear he sees all of you. You have become hollow, transparent, an empty vessel for all his pride and joy, hopes and expectations.

His face breaks into a smile. Go get 'em tiger, he says, winking.

Fiction

You wish everyone would stop fucking winking at you.

This is the biggest day of your life. State. State. State. Explosions in the Sky blares through your headphones on the bus ride down to Dallas. You make sure no one sees the album cover is from the *Friday Night Lights* movie. You are not a cliché. You flip your phone screen down on the seat.

Jayne sits across from you. His wide, black face is scrunched in such a heavy concentration you are afraid his brows will be furrowed into a permanent uni-brow. The width of him takes up both seats, and for that, you are grateful. He is your left tackle, your most important line of protection. Only before a game is his face unsmiling. He has no headphones, but presses his head in his hands like his brains will start seeping out if he doesn't hold it together manually. You always ask him what he does before the game. He says he prays. You ask him why he doesn't do it like the black pastors in Baptist churches: out loud, outlandish. You blush when he does not smile back at you. You take things too far because you're allowed to get away with it. His face eventually cracks and white teeth shine, his nostrils flaring in unison. I'm just messing with you, he says. His head is shaved and shining and he gives it a rub and points at you, giving you good luck instead of prayers before placing his hands back on his forehead.

You look out the window and try and visualize the field, the massive stadium that Jerry Jones built, but your mind unwillingly pictures the fifty-yard patch of grass on which you used to play Pee-Wee football.

You are ten years old. Your shoulder pads make you top heavy, and you stumble every few steps, but you run anyway. No one can be late to practice. Your dad trails behind you with

Fiction

your water bottle that's basically a gallon cooler because it's August and the heat is so potent you really think you may melt into the grass and become a blade yourself.

Your helmet is too big and the forehead pad keeps slipping down over your eyes, but you shove it up with the heel of your palm and you keep moving forward toward the Coach who is starting to blow his whistle for everyone to huddle up, which makes twenty little boys pretending to be men stumble and sprint and stumble and sprint over to the Coach to form a circle.

Your dad took off work for the first time in living memory. He keeps talking about how you are going to be a star, a real leader out there. QB on offense, linebacker on defense. He calls them generals, and that makes you feel brave.

The Coach asks you to step up and play linebacker. It's a tackle drill. Your helmet slips over your eyes, but you push it up with your hand. Coach told you to always stay on your toes, so you're doing a little dance, tapping one toe on the ground, then another. It's supposed to make you fast, he said. It's supposed to make you explode.

He blows the whistle, and they toss one of the running backs the ball. He's running towards you in a seemingly drunken attempt at a straight line his shoulder pads won't let him make. He tries to cut outside of you, but you anticipate it. You launch off your toes towards him, lower your helmet, and hit him in between your chest and shoulders, wrapping your arms around him until he is on the ground.

- You see that, boys?! You see that hit! That's how we EXPLODE. That's a nice hit, that's a hit that'll make you a MAN. No more babies out here, boys, we are here to hit, and hit HARD.

Coach's voice booms in the silence and the boys eventually cheer and whoop, but you do not. You look down at the boy you have hit. He is lying there, whimpering. Coach finally stops

Fiction

talking and notices he hasn't gotten up. He rushes over and whispers a few things and helps the boy up. He limps over to the sideline holding his shoulder. You cannot stop looking at him.

During the water break you run over to your dad. That was a good hit, your dad says, looking down at you. Smiling. Proud. You do not smile back. You stare at the boy who is holding his arm. You hurt him. You did not mean to, but you did. You want him to be okay.

Your dad sees where you are looking. He'll be all right, tiger, he says. You do not meet his eyes.

- It's a game about strength, and you always gotta be stronger than the other guy. That's part of your job. You work to be strong, and you work to be the best. What you did was good. You showed them all that you're the best. That's the goal.

You go back on the field because your dad said it would be okay. They put you at quarterback this time, and the coach teaches you the drop back.

80 percent of your weight on your back foot, twenty on your front. Pivot off the ball of your back foot. Launch your first step for depth. Keep your chin over your toes so you don't fall backward. Quick step, cross over. Look to the right for your first read. One big, two quick.

One step. Two steps. Three steps.

This is the worst day of your life. You try not to think about it too much because it will distract you, make you play worse. But it's true. The University was all you dreamed of. D1, games on ESPN, Heisman talk. Your name talked about by all the analysts. First round pick, NFL, millions of dollars.

Fiction

You have given your life to the game. You have been devoted. You are not just a player, you're a convert. There is no higher cause for which to sacrifice your body, your youth as well. You're still a virgin because sex distracts and destroys. That's what your dad told you.

There's this girl though. She's beautiful. Her name is Lily, and you like that because it reminds you of spring. She sat next to you in English your sophomore year, and she answered every question, on every book. She never used Spark Notes.

She assumed you did, though. Your great hulking frame spilling out from your desk and over to hers; most girls used this as an opportunity to get close to you, to touch you, to feel the arm that threw thirty-four touchdown passes in the best two seasons Steinbeck High has ever witnessed.

She nudged your elbow over because it was pushing her notes off her desk. She didn't wink as she did it; she rolled her eyes. She told you how much she hated her notes getting crumpled. You asked her what was so important anyway, the teacher barely talked. Pain, she said. You laughed and ran your hands through your hair like all of the girls liked. You looked away from her, shaking your head, still smiling. An opportunity for her to shove you playfully. Then you could shove her back. You could miss her shoulder by inches and accidentally graze her boob. She would blush and so would you.

Lily frowned. You looked like an idiot, still smiling, still looking away, still waiting for the one semblance of female touch you could get away with without your father's face bearing down on you, his anger palpable even in imagination.

Why are you smiling, she asked. You're surprised. She's not being flirtatious. Her dark brows are furrowed so heavily her entire forehead is scrunched up. Your mother would say that's

Fiction

a risky face to keep because it'll leave wrinkles. In a moment of insanity, you think about telling her that. To break the ice.

- Well?

Um, is all you say. You're a fucking dumbshit. You're trying to figure out how to make her smile. How to make her shove you. You just want a goddamn boob graze.

- Do you even know what book we are reading?

You don't know; you haven't been paying attention all semester. You look at the chalkboard in hopes of seeing some kind of hint scrawled, but your teacher is sitting at her desk, hunched over a gigantic book with a highlighter, her face so close to the text that the hairs on her giant mole next to her lip are brushing the pages. You can't see the title.

I've been busy, you say. You motion to your playbook and grin. You know it's a grin and not a smile because you're trying to be bashful.

She stares at the playbook and back at you. She points to her book and says that she's been busy too.

The Odyssey.

So what's pain got to do with *The Odyssey*? You ask. You're trying to get her to like you so she can get you notes for the test. Not that it matters. Your teacher will make sure you pass.

She didn't answer you for a while, so you thought that was that.

- His destiny was pain. Odysseus. "The son of pain, a name he'll earn in full."

She paused. She squinted her eyes as she thought. She ran her hands through her auburn hair and you couldn't believe your own trick was being used against you.

- I mean, his name means trouble. Literally. So trouble goes on this journey and he's trying to find his way home, but he can't. Because he, you know, keeps running into trouble.

Fiction

And trouble brings pain. So, like, he has to endure all this pain, but he keeps fighting to come home. I don't know. I just, I guess, I just find it kinda beautiful.

You stared at her, confused at the eloquence flowing out of that beautiful mouth. You looked like a dumbshit. Again.

Shouldn't you be taking notes? She asked. Her face broke into a smile. A real smile. And that just split you apart for some reason; a great fault line in your heart. The more you got to know her, the wider the expanse became.

She was so fucking smart. She was so fucking beautiful.

Somewhere along the way you were kissing her and you just lost yourself in her. And that was a problem. Because you do not belong to yourself, your body is not yours to give. She divided your attention and that was unacceptable. You tried explaining yourself, but she made it sound so stupid.

- You're going to choose a game over me?

There would be other girls, you lied to yourself.

All for the league.

Every QB out of the University has ended up in the NFL in one form or another for the past twenty years. Tech's QBs are forgotten as soon as they graduate. Even the good ones. That is the nature of Division Two. You think about all the other coaches who talked to you last year. How you blew them off. How you told them you were committed to the University. How you told them you would never go anywhere else. How Coach Redford was the best coach in the state and that's where you wanted to be. Your dad said this was a smart negotiation tactic, that it increased your value with the University. And it did. They loved you. They wanted you. But they fucking dropped you.

Fiction

You are not the sum of this team, but you are a part. A giant puzzle piece among the smaller—a corner or the middle one or something like that. You don't know; you haven't had much time for puzzles.

Everyone in Steinbeck knows your name. You are on the front page of the newspaper every Saturday morning, you do radio interviews with the local station, sometimes the news channel will interview you if they don't have enough highlight footage from the last game to analyze. You are their favorite headline.

They crave you. They chant your name in the stadium so loud it feels as if the air is vibrating. When it's fourth and ten, they want the coach to go for it because they know you can handle it.

The pressure bookends. The beginning of the season and the end: Two-A-Days and State.

The sweat keeps you dreading and coming back for more. It reduces you to your most primal parts. Two-a-days in August. The season unthinkable in the North Texas heat. The boys down in Houston say y'all have it easy because there isn't humidity, but they don't have the dust. The dryness makes the ground crack; the grass, sharpened by thirst, stabs ankles and makes them bleed. Then the fire ants come and devour your exposed calves.

The wind stays at bay until it rises up, bringing the dust along with it in swirling pellets of rock and sand. It fills your lungs as you heave in and out, trying not to vomit after gassers. Your nose bleeds because there isn't enough moisture in the air during the afternoon practices. Someone hands you a wadded up tissue to stick in your nose, and everyone tells you it looks like a tampon. They laugh and so do you. You wonder if the University training camp will be like this, but you know it won't.

Fiction

Your exposed skin browns in the heat of the sun. The sweet, heavy smell of grass, freshly cut, baking in the sun, fills your nostrils. Sweat falls into your mouth as you practice your audible. Your mother would yell at you if she knew you didn't have your mouth guard in, but out here, you are wild, you are free. You are not a bit tamed—you read that, too, at some point along the way.

Every sprint, every bench press, every squat—the extra passing and the hits all break your body to make it better. You get stronger, faster, smarter. And so do your teammates. And that's the point because it's all for each other. That's what will propel you to state, Coach says, the guys in front of you and beside you and behind you.

This is the last day your father will love you. There is nothing like a love contingent upon success because when you are successful, the love streams in like nothing else. You are the center of his world. You are the source of his pride. He's made a good life for himself as an electrician, but you take the cake.

He's done everything for you. When you were in seventh grade and you tore your Achilles, he worked his ass off to pay for your surgery. He never told you how much work he was putting in. Only the purple shadows underneath his eyes let you know that every minute he spent at the plant aged him. He wasn't meant to work inside. He was meant for open field tackles and sweat and pain.

Your father doesn't get drunk often, but when he does it's on whiskey and nostalgia. He's a happy drunk, which you know is lucky because you've seen the bruises on Jayme's back, but you hate it still. You do not like seeing your father out of control.

Fiction

But even his moments of turbulence are easily calculated. He sits in his chair and talks about his best football games until he falls asleep. He goes on about how many sacks he got off the line and how many touchdowns he caught as a receiver. He says he was fast—not nigger fast, but fast enough. You know you should correct him, but you have no voice around your father. And, besides, Jayme says it all the time. You are lying to yourself.

You talk to your mom about truth, though. Mostly about the books you read. It started when you told her you thought there was something of Odysseus in you. You asked her what she thought. About you and Odysseus and *The Odyssey*. You've never seen her more excited. Not even after you threw seven touchdowns in one game.

Your father never participates in these talks, but he watches them. You don't know this, and you never will. He watches your arms move up and down, left and right as you try and explain why you still are like Odysseus, even if you're not much of a trickster. He smiles because you sound so much like your mother. After a while, he walks into the living room, and cuts off the words so eloquently streaming out of your mother's mouth like liquidated poetry. He goes straight to you. He asks about practice and if you're ready for Lamar because that is the language the two of you speak. You talk over the option while your mother fades into the background.

She goes into the kitchen to get your father a beer. He thanks her with a kiss, a deep one that is true. You shift in your seat, always made uncomfortable by the reminder that your parents are bonded over something other than you.

She winks at you as she walks out of the room, and you know you must follow her lead. The two of you put away a dimension of yourselves; you become flat lines that your father can

Fiction

clearly understand. X's and O's in a playbook. Offense, defense, special teams. Life simplified into an outline that can be mulled over in a large, over worn leather chair.

He loves to watch you play. Every Pee Wee scrum, every Junior High start, every Varsity game, he's been there in the stands, watching. Forever overhead. His note pad is in one hand, his pencil in the other; his glasses rest precariously on the tip of his nose, somehow managing to not tip over. He has an excel spreadsheet printed out. Four copies. One for every quarter.

He kept every game where a goose egg rested in the Interceptions slot. All the others were crumpled into a furious fist and thrown away before he left the stadium. Soon enough there will be no more papers for him to collect or throw away. You will be his son and nothing more.

You wonder what the fuck it is exactly that you have been doing all of this time. Your whole life decided for you by the rules of a game. You wonder what it's like to have your own thoughts. What it'll be like to make your own decisions, to not have everything dictated for you. But that's terrifying. Because your world is so perfectly outlined in the grass. Four quarters, fifteen minutes each. Stay in bounds. Do not exceed the one hundred yards allotted to you. Get the ball, give the ball. Memorize the playbook, read the defense. Your soul lives in between two giant, yellow goal posts. You are the Star Quarterback. You took the 'Stangs to State. You were going to be the first one from your town to play for the University. And after the final whistle, you will be a State Champion. And then you will be Nothing Special.

You walk out of the tunnel, onto the field. It's massive. The screen overhead takes up three quarters of the field, and they've got several cameras waiting to film the game. Your face will be 160 feet wide across the screen for the entire stadium to see. So you stand and you stare. You know you look like a dumbshit, but it's Jerry World and you're playing football.

Fiction

Meaningful football, maybe for the last time. You see your father. You have to scan the lower deck a couple of times to find him, but there he is. You can tell because he's already on the edge of the seat, his forever-clenched butt cheeks barely balancing on the edge. He's watching, waiting, looking for you. The two of you make eye contact. He gives you a thumbs up. You nod. He is imagining you with that ring on your finger. After the game, all he will have to look forward to is giving you a slap on the back while shaking your hand, feeling for your ring.

State Champion.

Once he traces his finger over those words he'll smile and say, "My boy!" All the while refusing to acknowledge the man you will become.

It's time to give up yourself. Up to the gods. You feel like Odysseus going into battle; you don't want to think about what will happen once you try and sail home.

You let the sound of the drum line dictate the rhythm of your heart. Jayme runs over with your helmet and gives you a slap on the back. Show time, baby, he says. You nod, but you know this is not a show. This is life. This is reality. Everything before and everything after is just a blur of choices you made and have yet to make.

You win the coin toss and choose to get the ball first. You can hear the whole city of Steinbeck on their feet. This is their dream; you are their dream.

You line up in the shotgun, but you see the safety pull off the blitz. You audible just like you practiced in the backyard of your childhood home. Your voice is strong, deep, commanding, just like you always hoped it would be. Sixty minutes. The most important of your life. The play clock is down to fifteen, but you know what you're doing. You've never been so sure of something in your life. You let the center know you're ready. You don't even try a hard count.

You drop back.