

The Catch

The Southern sun was out, the sky didn't hold a cloud, and Sebastian would be the first of his teammates onto the field. He always was. His rituals were his security, the repetition of getting ready, stretching, taping, stretching some more, leg pads on, rolling his neck, double-tying his shoes. He even liked practice, the drills run over and over to fine-tune how the team would perform.

He left the locker and entered the tunnel, dimly lit, and walked to the field. The dot of blue from the sky beckoned him, becoming bigger and bigger until he saw the turf and the vast, mostly quiet stadium welcoming him. Television crews were setting up, others milled around, but few fans were seated. He scanned the field, the technicians working on cameras and cables, and the gophers trailing them. Men in suits, guys in windbreakers. He looked, and there by the bench, he found Elijah.

That was part of the ritual, too. Before every game, he and Elijah would toss a ball on the sidelines. It had started his freshman year, and they had kept it up. Now Sebastian stood as a senior, ready to face Tech in the biggest game of his college career, and he had needed that final pregame catch.

Elijah was 15 now. He had grown considerably since the first day they started throwing the ball. Sebastian didn't even remember how it started. Elijah was the sports information director's son. When he was 9 he had been riding his bike, and a car swerved, hitting him, crushing the bike and sending Elijah flying. The head injury had stunted his mental growth, doctors said, and he had to learn to do simple tasks again. He spoke slowly, deliberately, and his memory had gaping holes. Swiss cheese of the brain, Sebastian had overheard once. Elijah often would start to remember something, then stop suddenly, realizing he couldn't finish his thought. He kept his home address and phone number in his wallet.

Sebastian trotted to the boy, who was examining the football and tossing it gently to himself. A crooked smile appeared as the boy saw Sebastian, who dropped his helmet and waved a taped wrist, signaling for him to throw.

"Elijah," he said, "how was your morning?"

"Fine," he answered as he pursed his lips, letting go a wobbling pass in Sebastian's direction.

Sebastian caught it, and threw a soft, arching spiral back. “I had eggs and grits this morning. Man they were tasty!” He often tried to help spur the boy’s memory with statements like that, what he had for breakfast or what movie he had seen.

Elijah concentrated on the pass, running under it as if he were catching a punt, holding out his arms and hugging the ball as it landed. From a distance if someone had seen Elijah, they would have thought he was cradling a puppy.

“I, I had,” he said, gripping the ball, “bread, no toast. And butter.” He threw the ball back.

“Was it good?” Sebastian asked.

“And jam,” the boy said.

“What kind of jam?”

Elijah ran a zig-zag pattern to where he thought the ball was headed and scooped it in. He readied to throw it, then stopped and said: “Strawberry.”

“Mm-hmm,” Sebastian said, “bet that was good.”

Elijah didn’t answer. He concentrated hard on his throw, standing like a quarterback as he tried to grip the ball, and let go a wobbly pass that Sebastian caught by moving a bit closer.

“I don’t like Tech’s uniforms,” Elijah said.

Sebastian grinned. “Me neither.” He was used to Elijah’s sudden conversation shifts, more results of his brain getting sloshed after the accident. “But you like the green and black, right?”

“Yeah,” Elijah said, “they’re not my favorite colors, but I like them. I like blue.”

Sebastian smiled at the boy’s honesty. “My uncle used to drive a blue car,” he said as he watched the boy work his fingers around the threads of the ball. Every throw was an effort.

At 6-2, Sebastian was rarely the tallest receiver on the field. But he was almost always the fastest. He had pianist’s fingers, long legs, and he ran track as well as played football in high school. He had dreamed of playing for State since he was younger than Elijah, to don the green and black and take the field before 90,000 screaming fans. His proudest moment came when he committed to the university. ‘Hometown star stays home’ read headlines about his college choice. He never regretted his decision. Not after an injury sidelined him for almost a year during his sophomore season, not after he spent more time rehabilitating his knee than he did catching footballs. Sure, he got down on what had

happened occasionally. After his surgery he lost a step of speed, as well as his starting job. But as he stood playing catch with Elijah, he remembered once again how important football was to him, how important going out at the top was. Even if it wasn't the top he had envisioned.

"Today is your last game," Elijah said.

"You remembered," Sebastian answered, catching the ball.

"Are you sad?" the boy asked.

Sebastian smiled as he saw the stands starting to fill up and the coaches coming out to call pregame drills. "Yeah, Elijah, I'm a little sad."

The two threw a few more times, then Sebastian called out to Elijah what coaches had called to him countless times over the years: "Let's bring it in."

The boy trotted toward him and stood before him. He had a wisp of sandy-colored hair hanging in front of his face. He stood about a foot shorter than Sebastian, slightly pudgy and with a perpetual look on his face that Sebastian had never figured out. Wonderment, confusion -- he couldn't tell. Sebastian thanked him for playing catch and stuck out his hand. Elijah slapped it and turned his palm up. Sebastian went to slap it back, but gripped it and turned it into a handshake instead.

"Be well, Elijah," he said.

Elijah smiled. "You ... too," he said.

Sebastian tucked the ball into Elijah's cradling grasp, picked up his helmet, and trotted off to the coaches.

His pregame drills were smooth, and Sebastian tried to enjoy every one. There would be no bowl games, no more football after today. No agent, no contract, no media. He was 6 when he got his first State jersey. He stuffed rags and tissues in it to make shoulder pads, running around the house and yard, throwing the ball to himself and maneuvering through invisible defenders.

When the game started, Sebastian, lining up in his usual place to the far right of the quarterback, could think only of Elijah's question: "Are you sad?" *Yes*, he thought, *I am*.

State played Tech, the better team this year, tough. Tech scored a touchdown, but State came back with a field goal. Tech scored again, but State's speedy kick returner matched it with a long runback. And so it went, trading scores until late in the fourth quarter, when Tech held a 38-34 lead with three minutes remaining.

Sebastian caught his breath on the sidelines, looked over and saw Elijah briefly, but the boy didn't see him. He was staring intently, watching Tech line up slowly, hoping to use up the clock and go home with a win.

Suddenly there was a commotion, and Sebastian looked up to see the referee signal State had recovered a fumble. It was a chance. Sure, they were 60 yards from scoring, but it was hope.

Sebastian tugged on his helmet and joined his offensive teammates. Pitcher Greenwood, the quarterback, drove the team with a steady ease. State ran, passed and faked their way into Tech territory. Sebastian had caught an 18-yard pass over the middle for a first down, keeping the dream alive. On first down, Greenwood faked to his right, pivoted, then threw to his running back on the left, who was hit immediately. Now it was second down from the same spot, and the clock kept moving. Greenwood hurried his troops and called the play.

It was a pass to his sure-handed tight end, but Tech's defense had seen what was coming, and they swarmed Greenwood, crushing him before he could even set to throw. As he shook off the cobwebs he called the third-down play in the huddle, glancing up at his receivers.

"This is it boys, let's get the score!"

Greenwood moved toward the line of scrimmage, warily surveying the defense that looked at him hungrily. They had had a taste of him on the last play, and wanted more.

"Hut ... Hut ... HUT!"

Greenwood faded to throw, looking at his receivers running downfield. He saw Sebastian to his right, but he was covered. He turned to his left and launched the ball downfield. His receiver, Putman Grant, and a defender leaped, and Grant came down with the ball yards from the goal line.

But the crowd's cheers subdued when they saw the referee's yellow flag laying quietly on the field. Sebastian saw it, too, and had a bad feeling. Usually it would be defensive pass interference, but not on this play. Grant had held, then pushed down on the defender's shoulder pads. The play was coming back.

Now it was fourth down from the 40, and State called their final timeout with seven seconds remaining.

The players caught their breath as Greenwood and the coaches met. After a half a minute Greenwood tugged on his helmet and walked to the huddle, his teammates gathering around him.

“One last chance, fellas,” he said. “So we’re going with 89 slant cross over the top, on three, ready?”

“Break!”

Sebastian perked up at the play call. His number was 89, and the call indicated where he was to run. He had a chance -- one final play -- to win the game.

Sebastian was tired, but that didn’t matter now. He felt an exhausted calm come over him as he took his position. As he stood alone, he knew this was his final play of his career. His dream of playing professional football didn’t end with the injury. It ended when he realized he lost a step, enough speed for pro coaches to notice. There was always someone faster or bigger to take your place. No, he wouldn’t play pro ball. His career would end right here.

He heard Greenwood bark out the third hut and he was off. He ran straight, seeing his defender running half-backward, and half turning with him, not sure which way Sebastian would go. He kept his legs pumping, sprinting, for 20 yards. The offensive line had to hold up and protect Greenwood this one final time, just long enough. When Sebastian got to the 5-yard-line he suddenly cut in to his left, with all his might, surprising the defender who thought he was going to head straight for the end zone.

The play that was called sent two receivers on the left to run straight, then quickly slant to the right corner of the end zone. Sebastian’s route had him running straight, then suddenly to the left, crossing over the receivers. This way the quarterback could throw to either corner of the end zone. What State hoped was that Tech’s defense would get confused and leave someone open. That someone was Sebastian. His defender stumbled when he had turned left, and twisted his way into the ground. Sebastian was running alone to the corner of the end zone.

For his part, Greenwood was like a man behind a dam, water leaking slowly. His offensive line struggled to stave off the charging defenders, who finally broke free, one by one, lunging at Greenwood. The quarterback scrambled to his left, planted his foot and heaved the ball.

Sebastian angled to the end zone and saw the ball ahead of him, spiraling and starting its descent. He ran, churning his legs as if accelerating into another gear, then dove with outstretched hands as the ball fell. He extended himself in the air, fingers spaced and legs straight, reaching for the ball.

He felt the ball touch his fingertips -- not once, but twice -- then skitter off into the end zone. His body crashed in a thud, skidding some, then stopping, alone.

As he walked off the field, his head hung as he crossed the sidelines for the last time. *If I could do that again, I could have made that catch*, Sebastian thought, *I know it*. But he also knew it was just frustration talking. Frustration and hurt and disappointment.

Sebastian said almost nothing the rest of the day. Nothing in the locker room as he showered and dressed, nothing as he ate dinner alone, and nothing as he stayed in his dorm room the rest of the night, quietly holing up with his studies. He was numb. He had learned long ago to accept his injury, and he knew losses were part of the game, but it was a game he loved and was a part of his life that was ending. No matter how hard he tried, he felt regret. He found himself staring at his hands, knowing that the ball bounced twice before slipping away.

He sat wearing an old pair of sweats as he tried to concentrate on his reading assignments at his desk but found himself drifting into sleep, a sleep he seemed to welcome.

The knock was a quiet rap, but it startled him nonetheless. His head shot up, and he turned to face the door. A light knock came again, polite but firm. He opened it, and there stood a man in a conservative, 1960s black and white suit. Even the black tie was narrow. His graying temples put him in his 50s. The man stood in a long black overcoat looking like he had come from a funeral.

“Sebastian Lewis?”

“Yeah, yes,” Sebastian said, wondering both how long he had dozed and how the man had gotten into his dorm past the check-in window near the mailboxes. A guard patrolled the area morning and night to keep drunken or unruly students out.

“My name is Mr. Denuo. I am a consultant and have a proposition for you.”

Skepticism shook Sebastian awake. “Hey man, I can’t be talking to-”

“To an agent?” said the man, smiling. “No, I am not an agent, but you can talk to an agent, or anyone, now. Your college career, sir, is now officially over.”

Sebastian looked at the man, still standing in his doorway. He knew what the man said was true, but it still hurt to hear.

“Don’t get me wrong; you had a fine career. It’s just, well ...”

Sebastian dismissed it. “I know what you mean.”

“You really loved football, Mr. Lewis,” he said. “I could always see it in you when you played.”

Suddenly Sebastian thought maybe this man was a representative from the pros. Maybe they were willing to take a chance on him. Maybe they didn’t think the knee was that bad, that it could hold up. He’d be willing to work even harder to come back. Maybe ...

“May I come in, Mr. Lewis?”

“Yes, oh, I, sorry,” Sebastian stumbled, opening the door wider and pulling out his desk chair as Sebastian moved to the bed. “You said you were a consultant? For which team?”

Mr. Denuo smiled again, but not patronizingly. “No team, sir, nor the league, if that was what you are thinking.”

Sebastian’s brief daydream deflated.

“Mr. Lewis, I know a little while ago, you wished for something. You wished very ... earnestly,” the man said. “Your exact words, if memory serves me, were ‘If I could do that again’ -- is that right?”

“How did you ...”

“Those were the exact words, yes, Mr. Lewis?”

“Yes, but ...” Sebastian gazed at the man, not knowing how he knew. He must have been walking by and must have said it aloud, out of exhaustion he must not have realized. Sebastian’s gaze hit the floor momentarily, and reality took root. He knew he had not said it aloud.

Mr. Denuo read his mind.

“Sebastian,” he said kindly, “don’t worry how, but I know these things. More importantly, did you mean it?”

“Look man, I don’t know how you heard me or knew I said that, and I don’t know how you got in here, but-”

Once again the man cut him off. “Mr. Lewis, what would you say if I told you I were in a position to grant your wish, that you could do that again?”

Sebastian stared.

“Tell me, the man continued, “what was that hope for, exactly?”

Sebastian looked intently at the man, bewildered. “I wanted that catch over. That catch at the end of the game, it bounced off my hands twice, and slipped, it just ...” Sebastian stared at his two open palms that curled into fists.

The man was quiet for a second, then said: “What would you say if I could give you that do-over.”

“I’d say you were crazy.”

“I am not, and you could do it again. You see Sebastian,” said the man, shifting slightly in the molded, standard-issue plastic desk chair, “everyone in life gets one do-over.”

Sebastian’s eyes widened but he remained quiet.

“That’s right,” the man said, with a slight chuckle, “everyone.”

“And you are in a position to grant me this? What are you -- an angel?” he said, half humoring the man.

“No,” he said. “Just someone who can help, here and now, if this is the one time you want to use your chance.”

“Why me?” Sebastian asked, still disbelieving.

“Everyone gets one,” he said. “At one time in their life. Individuals like myself can ... facilitate things, make them happen. If you want this, you tell me, and it will happen. But this will be the only one in your life.”

“If this is true, then there would be no goats in a game, ever. Every receiver would be wanting to make that catch that they missed,” Sebastian said.

The man shook his head no. “You are forgetting something, Sebastian. Yes, the receivers in the world want to make that catch, the one that was just out of reach. But the world also has defenders who fell trying to intercept the ball. Don’t forget,” the man continued, “not every request is for something that happens on a football field. There are last-second shots in basketball, close plays at home in baseball, sprinters in track and field. The list goes on, and that’s just sports. The majority of people in the world don’t even play sports.”

Sebastian remained quiet, taking it all in, and found himself listening. He looked up and stared at the man.

“What’s in it for you? What do you get? Is this like selling our souls or something?”

The man smiled again. “No, it’s nothing like that, I can assure you.”

“I don’t get it,” Sebastian said. “Seems the world would be a different place, with people asking to win the lottery, or stuff like that.”

“No,” Mr. Denuo said, “there are rules. No wishes for changed lottery tickets. Money is off the table. No wishes for dying parents to get better. That falls under ... fate, shall we say. I’m not a genie in a bottle, and I’m not God. I am just in a position to take care of this, the one-time do-over. It cannot be life or death. If you are harming someone and he doesn’t die, well,” the man said, chuckling slightly again, “you don’t get a second chance

to make sure he does. And no going back in time several years, to see what would have happened if you did something different when you were in fifth grade.”

“No, Sebastian, it must be something that affects you primarily and be for you. It must be something that happened within the past 12 hours. One other thing: You won’t remember the do-over. You’ll think, as will everyone, that it happened on the first go-round.”

Sebastian had doubts, but the more than man spoke the more intrigued he became. He found himself saying: “What do I do?”

“If you care for this truly to be your life’s sole do-over, just close your eyes and say to yourself what you want done over. You’ll find yourself back at the moment. Remember: Everybody gets one, and one alone, and you don’t remember it.”

“Why,” Sebastian asked. “Why do this?”

“Because everyone has wishes. Because I am able to. Because everyone -- from the little girl in the Middle Eastern desert to the businessman in Japan to the football player at State all have hopes and dreams and wishes. Because it is part of *life*.” He said the last word with a calming emphasis.

“And you just go around making this happen?” Sebastian asked.

“I am one of many. You will understand some day.”

Sebastian could say nothing for a moment, thinking it over. Finally, he took a breath and said: “OK.”

“OK what?” the man asked.

“OK, I want a do-over. I want it now. I want to make that catch, I don’t want it bouncing off my fingers or my hands, I want to haul it in and I want the touchdown to count and I want us to win on that play. I want to go out a winner.”

“Then that’s it. We’ll be connected, in a way, until the quarterback yells from the line of scrimmage. From that moment, you’ll be on your own, and you won’t remember this happening. Whatever your last words are to me, Sebastian, is what I can do.”

The man stood. Sebastian stared at the darkness outside his window, a tree swaying its branches in the wind as he let the man’s words penetrate.

“Hey, if I-” he started to say, then turned to see an empty doorway.

Sebastian walked over to the window and looked down at the campus that had been his home for four years. After a minute, he turned back to his bed, laid down and closed his eyes. He had a peaceful feeling come over him, and he felt drowsy. He reached for a

blanket to pull over himself as he felt his eyelids become heavy. As he gripped the blanket, he ...

... woke. Screams all around him. He wasn't gripping the blanket, he was tugging on his facemask as he reached the line of scrimmage. He had the strongest, and strangest, de-javu sensation he had ever had. He remembered his conversation with Mr. Denuo, but had no idea what had happened. It had just been seconds ago he was talking with him.

He heard Greenwood bark the initial commands. *How did I get here?* he thought.

"Hut!" he heard in the distance.

This can't be real. But it was real. Real as the blood streaked on his pants leg, real as the exhilaration he felt. But Sebastian had another sensation, one he couldn't get a handle on, one that felt just a little ... wrong.

He heard the second hut as he stood alone at his part of the field, looking down the line at his teammates. But then he turned and saw Elijah off to the side, holding a water bottle and staring intently. Suddenly Sebastian knew what he really wanted. Without any more thought, he relied on instinct like he conditioned himself to do on the field so many years ago. *Give it to Elijah,* he said aloud. *Give my do-over to Elijah.*

He heard the final "Hut!" and found himself running, running, cutting in, seeing the same defender stumble as he cut to his left, then churning his legs for an instant, then diving, stretching as the ball came closer and -- off his fingertips, again.

Sebastian picked himself up and found himself walking out of the end zone, the :00 on the scoreboard staring at him. And somehow, even though it all ended here, he kept his head up.

"Life," he thought, "isn't so bad."