

## The Game

Everyone around him rose and cheered.

Gary remained unmoved. The motion around him was a blur and he sat there as if stone. His shoulders were slumped forward more than usual and anyone studying him might notice that his breathing was uneven -- as if, he had forgotten the need to exhale. His whole body was rigid and the intensity of the newly formed wrinkles on his forehead made him look many years older.

A little too late, his automatic response kicked in; he stood up clapping listlessly while everyone else had begun to sit back down. Realizing this, Gary quietly resumed his place on the bleacher. It was the bottom of the eighth inning and the grand slam evened the scores.

Last week he was overly thrilled at the opportunity to attend his first World Series Championships; yet now he was numb. It was foolish of him to have even come out.

His brother nudged him and gave him an encouraging smile. Forcing one back, he hoped that the turmoil inside was not apparent. Pressing his leg into the hard cold bleacher, he fought back the threatening tears.

He wondered how much longer the game would last. He looked at his watch. It was 21:32.01. The pitcher wound up the ball and released; the hitter made contact; the umpire yelled, "FOUL!" Gary looked at his watch again. It was 21:34.47.

He felt incredibly agitated. Standing up, he muttered, "*Charles, I'll . . . be right back.*" The words came out forced and awkward. Where had his saliva gone? He didn't like the dryness in his mouth or the tightness of his throat.

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Charles raised his eyebrows in concern, but just nodded. Gary felt his interior oppression deepen. It was the same expression that everybody had been giving him for the last ten months. The look was one of helpless empathy. Looking away from his brother, he wished that one tear would take the plunge and escape. Maybe, if a single one discreetly rolled out, it would release or at least temper the overbearing pain in his soul, the cause of uneven exhale and inhalation.

He walked quickly toward the back of the stadium and disappeared into the less populated halls. A few fans were buying last minute hot dogs and beer. All but the stragglers on their way to the loo were glued to the screens well placed near the concessions.

He decided to buy a hot dog. Maybe eating something would allow his tongue to release its grip at the roof of his mouth. Maybe the motion of chewing would free the turmoil churning within him.

*“What a game, huh? That last...”*

*“Oh, yeah.”* He wished that the guy working would do his job and hand him his change. Small talk wasn't something he could pull off— not in this moment anyways. Loud cheers, the error, and the steal to second, providentially diverted attention off of him. Grateful for the reprise, he fled without his forty-two cents.

He walked throughout the huge hallway until he found a secluded spot. There was nowhere to sit. He squatted down. His muscular physique held the position well. He unfolded the foil, and bit into the warm bread and cheap overcooked meat. He slurped the coke. It was flat. Without consciously being aware of the next bites and sips, both were completely consumed. From the squat,

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he slid down and sat directly on the dirty floor. With his head and back leaning on the concrete wall, his whole body emanated “completely defeated”.

He was in a different place, a different time. He was with his son, his eight year old. They were playing catch. Gary was correcting his throw. It would have to be more steady if he wanted to be the pitcher in little leagues. Gary backed up to receive the projectile. It landed perfectly in his hand.

A tear rolled down Gary’s face and across his nose. More followed. He fought the flash backs of the car accident later that day, the paralyzing moments in the E.R. His finger traced the scar on his knee.

*“Hey, sir. Is everything ok?”* Gary looked up. A middle-aged couple was standing near him.

*“Oh yeah. Thanks.”*

He wiped his face with his sleeve. He looked at his watch. It was 21.48.35. The game should be over soon. However, it no longer seemed appropriate it. Today would have been his son’s ninth birthday. He pulled himself up and walked back to where Charles was.