

Just a Number

To the world, he is nothing more than a number and the number is 9.

To the world, that number is enough. The world sees him as nothing more than a digit with a set of associated statistics.

But to one person, he is much more than a mere number.

To that one person, he is the world.

It would not be far from the truth to say that Josh Riley was born clutching a baseball. The pictures scattered around his family's home would certainly give you that impression. In even the earliest shots, where Josh was too immature to grasp much more than his own hand or his mother's breast, there was a baseball beside him. Mr. Riley was determined that his son would play baseball, which was a sport his own weak knees had forced him to forsake. His resolve became even more pronounced when Mrs. Riley declared emphatically that there would be no more children. Since little Josh was 22 inches long at birth and took 31 agonizing hours to bring into the world, who could blame her?

I didn't know Josh when he was clutching a baseball in his cradle. I never even saw him until my family moved to Westhaven. That was the summer between my eleventh and twelfth grade years. While most children might have a difficult time adjusting to such an upheaval immediately before their last year of high school, I had no such problems. I adjusted to life the first time I saw Josh Riley walking between classes.

He was also a senior that year and was nothing less than a young Adonis. He stood six foot four, had curly auburn hair, and carried himself with a nonchalant but unmistakable swagger. At least, that was the impression I got as I followed behind him between second and third period on my first full day at Westhaven High School. My first full day of living, I might add.

I set about learning everything I could about my new demigod, always thinking I was being clever and not realizing my fumbling adolescent methods were probably apparent to anyone who cared. Fortunately for me, I was the awkward new person in a school of three thousand souls. Josh Riley was the star pitcher on the school baseball team. We were going to win the state championship that year behind Josh's arm and nobody noticed one more person adoring him. I was just a nameless and faceless member of the worshipful throng. I was not eager to cast off this anonymity as I could follow Josh safely without being questioned.

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Whenever I did see Josh that year, he was always surrounded by people. All the most beautiful people that Westhaven could sport formed his entourage. It did not matter whether it was at school, the shopping mall, or the baseball field. He stood alone, head and shoulders above the rest of us. I am assuming he even had a coterie of loyal fans who followed him to the restroom, though my adoration never took me to that point. That would have been weird.

I signed up as a math tutor after school. I loved math and it seemed like a good way to spend my afternoons that otherwise would remain empty. It seems preposterous to claim that fate or some supernatural power ordained that Josh Riley should be my very first pupil, but I know of no rational or logical explanation. Now I would not have to furtively gaze at the object of my adoration. Twice a week, we would be sitting so close that our arms might brush or our thighs might touch under the library table.

During the entire three months that I tutored him, our arms brushed six times, our legs barely touched twice, and once he brushed a fly away from my hair and his fingers grazed my temple. That was the extent of our physical contact. However, something much more amazing occurred. I fully expected that once I talked with Josh, my crush would dissipate as I discovered that there was nothing more to Josh Riley than a great pitching arm. But the opposite occurred. Josh was interesting and funny and smart. True, he could barely keep up with his classes in school and he didn't seem to have had the chance to develop any interests outside of baseball yet, but I could tell that in his soul there was a beautiful creature just waiting to be liberated from its athletic prison cell. I would be his liberator. I knew that given enough time, I could mold Josh into the perfect human being that he was so obviously destined to become.

Josh graduated from Westhaven High and went to the local state university on a baseball scholarship. While we had not talked since our tutoring sessions beyond exchanging a couple of hellos in the hallway, I never gave up on what I knew to be the truth. Josh Riley was going to be a great man and I would be there as his partner in life. The two of us would stop at nothing...we could have the world.

I received offers from several Ivy League schools that year, but I knew where I was going to college. I followed Josh to the state university. I reasoned that with my brains and ambition, it didn't matter where I got my degree. What was important was that I would be near Josh when he needed me. While my parents didn't understand my decision (how could they...I knew I

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couldn't tell them the real reason behind my choice...they might not understand), they supported me and I enrolled the following fall.

Now it is March. Six months have elapsed since Josh and I arrived on campus, he to start his freshman season as the next great thing in pitching and me to be there when he needed me. I had been a little surprised at how expansive the campus was and how difficult it was to track Josh down sometimes. I kept my distance, watching him when I could. For nourishment I digested every word about the new baseball phenom that appeared in the school newspaper. I needed no other food source. Then, finally, it was the start of baseball season.

Now it is March. I have no idea as I sit in the bleachers on this chilly evening whether or not Josh will get to play tonight. It is the bottom of the sixth inning and he hasn't played yet this year. I am sitting alone in the stands. It turns out that none of my fellow chemistry majors are very interested in baseball. This must be because they have never seen Josh play. I will win them over in time. Besides, when I am alone, I do not have to share my hero.

My musings are interrupted by action on the field. For the third out in the sixth inning, the coach brings in his freshman star, Josh Riley. I glance over and down a few rows to see Mr. and Mrs. Riley standing and cheering loudly, just as they did at every game at Westhaven High.

The stadium lights have come on now, bathing the field in a strange phosphorescent glow as Josh trots out to the mound to begin his warm-up. The wind in the stands has picked up considerably and I shiver under my coat, pulling my arms up against my chest.

I am alone in my row, watching as my Adonis begins his warm-up. Other groups of people begin to chat with each other or share their greasy nachos and supersized sodas during this lull in the activity. I do not need any of these distractions. I am fully consumed with watching the hero on the field.

Josh is alone on the mound, standing like a sentinel in the glow of the lights. He stands tall and proud, completely alone. We are alike in this way. Now is his chance to prove his greatness to the world. Now everybody else will see what I have seen for the last year.

As he turns away from me to begin his windup, I focus on the large black 9 sewn in the middle of his back.

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But to one person, in this moment, he is so much more than a mere number.

To one person, he is the world.
