

St. Peter, Don't You Call Me

The clouds were already a troubling charcoal knot squatting on the horizon when Andrew stepped up to bat. The field was dry and dusty, grass beaten down into soggy brown mush. A rusted tin can stood for home base and Danny, the catcher, stood behind it, punching his hand in the moldy leather of his glove and taking quick peeks at the sky.

He pointed. "We need to go." Andrew hit his bat against his shoes and swung his hips, checking his stance. "Did you hear me, Andrew? Storm's coming. We gotta get back. The bell's probably already going."

Andrew flipped him off. Danny scowled.

"We've got at least an hour." More like thirty minutes, from the way the clouds were rippling in, but Andrew didn't want to make Danny any more nervous. He adjusted the bat again and swung. Something was off with his hips, he could feel it. Damn. "Don't be a wuss, Danny boy. We'll get back to the fields in time."

Danny muttered, but he squatted when Andrew stepped up to the plate without any more whining. Andrew settled lightly on his toes, squaring his shoulders. For months, under the safe cover of darkness, he'd practiced his swings until his arms trembled and his head throbbed with blood. In the early mornings, half dead from no sleep, he could barely lift his arms and the brutal toll of working the salt fields only made everything worse. Some days he felt like a walking bruise or one of those old, lame horses they put out to pasture before they shot the old bastard in the head.

But all of that hard work was paying off—he'd scored the sole home run, and he wasn't going to walk away from the field until he hit that damn ball again. The bat, beloved and familiar in his hands, warmed to his touch, almost vibrating against his palms. Andrew adjusted his grip, adjusted it again. Good.

The pitcher adjusted his hat and looked to the sky. Clive—old John's boy, Andrew's mother always called him. Moon-face tilted up, counting those shivering dark clouds like a mama cat with new kittens. Andrew sneered.

Clive's voice was almost blown away by the sharp gust of wind rippling across the field. "Shouldn't we get back?"

Andrew spat, satisfied by the weight and heft of the loogie as it hit the dirt. He'd practiced that, too.

"One last round," he shouted back.

Clive frowned. "But if we're late—"

"So let's be fast."

"My dad's going to be mad," Danny muttered behind Andrew.

Andrew's mother would beat him bloody, if he was lucky. Nothing ruined salt covers like rain—if any of them were still unprotected when the thunderstorm rolled in, they'd be ruined for production for weeks. Owen would fire him and his mother wouldn't hear excuses, wouldn't care about the rush of furious satisfaction he felt when he connected bat to ball. She would only care that he'd lost his job—their only income—to sheer foolishness.

Andrew ran his tongue over his teeth. He swung the bat to rest on his shoulder, cocking a hip. He could see the ball in his mind's eye, the beautiful arc of it over the grass into the copse of trees on the edge of the field.

Worth it.

"Come on, Clive," he said. "One more round, you versus me. You scared?"

Clive scowled and glanced back at the infielders. He squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. The ball met his glove with a sharp smack.

"I'm not *scared*, Jesus. Have it your way, then—one last round."

The infielders whispered as Clive raised his fist in the signal to keep playing. When Andrew looked back at his own team, they cheered. Thomas, the captain, stood tall and straight at the front of the line—when Andrew's eyes met his, he nodded. Permission granted. Andrew's heart picked up, goosebumps shivering up his neck as he turned back to face Clive.

Andrew breathed steadily through his nose as Clive watched Danny's signals. Head shake. Head shake. Wood creaked under Andrew's fingers as his grip tightened. He forced his hands to loosen again. Finally, the nod. Andrew's vision tunneled. Everything swept away: the trees, the clouds, the soggy field, the rusted tin cans, the infielders, even his own team.

There were only two things in his world now: Clive Owns and the ball.

Clive grimaced as he twisted his hips and brought his glove up. Shoulders bunching, his arm whipped out. Slow. Andrew released a breath. He didn't swing.

"Ball!"

The next pitch was another ball. And the next.

Sweat dripped into Andrew's eyebrows. He wiped his forehead with his dingy shirt sleeve and readjusted his grip on the bat. Blood pulsed in his ears, drowning out the shouts of his teammates and the whistling wind. He inhaled. Rain. Sweat. How much time did they really have? He risked a glance upward and his head throbbed at the inexorable ink spill of clouds on the pale blue sky, thickening and deadly.

No time to lose, but Andrew was wasting it anyway.

He should care—the rest of the boys did. They shifted and squirmed like leeches on the line, sending spooked looks over their shoulders. They knew what their foolish boyish games were costing them. So did Andrew. His mother's cracked whisper echoed in his ear as if she stood right behind him:

You stupid little fool, you think your game matters more than our money? You think you can buy bread with a game?

Baseball couldn't buy anything.

Andrew didn't care.

Clive grinned. He clearly thought he had Andrew pinned—another ball and they'd go home tied. Andrew would be a pariah with his own team for extending the game for nothing. They'd probably kick him off. Andrew gritted his teeth. Tightened and released his grip on the bat, turned his shoulders. No. He wasn't going home without this one last hit to get him through the gray drudgery of the fields. He'd break his own fingers first.

Clive's smile grew as he wound up. Smug bastard. Nothing was a certainty—anyone who mined salt should know that in their blood.

Andrew caught the trajectory of the final pitch in fragments: the whip of Clive's arm, the snap of his wrist, his fingers releasing the ball to its clean flight, straight over home plate.

Andrew's body moved on instinct: twist, rotate, connect. The bat made the most beautiful crack when it connected with the ball, sending it sailing, sweet as anything, over the field, straight up into those dark clouds—going, going, gone.

Wild satisfaction erupted in Andrew's stomach, hot and sharp, a euphoria so deep it echoed pain. Fist to the sky, he slammed his bat to the ground. A cloud of dust rose in a misty veil around it as he ran past, sprinting past all the bases until his lungs wailed for mercy. None of the other boys tried to stop him or even tried to go find the ball out in the grass and weeds.

Sound rushed in again when he crossed home base and skidded to a stop, bending to pant over his knees. Cheering and whoops from his teammates, disgruntled boos from everyone else. Andrew straightened and wiped the sweat from his face as he accepted the rush of back-slaps and congratulations.

Thomas offered Andrew a rare smile and ruffled his hair. His cap was already off, bat and glove tied to the bag he hefted over his shoulder. He'd pitched the entire game—a thin film of filth coated his starched white shirt, left open to expose the slick hollow of his throat.

"Nice work, kid," he said. "Now maybe Clive'll stop bragging all the damn time. If we keep this up, 1894's going to be our year." His smile deepened, dark cheek dimpling. "Never seen anyone hit a ball like you do. Regular Roger Connor. You gotta give me some tips."

Andrew's scalp tingled. Heat spread down his skull to his cheeks.

"Sure. I practice most nights."

Thomas patted his shoulder. "I'll join you sometime. You can show me how it's done."

Perfect happiness rolled over Andrew, subsuming everything in its path and leaving only clean joy—vibrating, incandescent, pure as the note from a tuning fork.

Nothing, he thought, would ever top this day.

“But we’d better get going,” Thomas said. “The bell’s gotta be ringing like crazy.”

Clouds roiled overhead, steel gray and mutinous, swallowing every inch of blue. Andrew’s throat clicked as he swallowed.

“My bat—”

“No time. We’ll come back for everything later.”

Thomas took his arm before Andrew could protest and dragged him with the crowd of boys hustling for the trees to the salt fields beyond. Andrew nearly turned back. His only bat! If he left it out in the rain, would it even survive? He couldn’t afford another one. Worry tumbled in his belly, gnawing past the bright afterimage of happiness still bubbling through his veins. But there was no more time to waste.

The bell clanged overhead as they approached. Workers scurried between the wide rows of vats, rolling down roofs and getting them safely covered before the storm. More men rushed to move tin buckets overflowing with salt inside the old salt houses for safekeeping. Past the fields, just along the horizon, Lake Onondaga’s blue-gray water roiled and crashed.

As they ran through the fields, boys broke off to go join their families or fellow workers. Thomas finally released Andrew’s wrist with a little wink, disappearing to join his father. Andrew’s wrist tingled with heat and he rubbed it as he stopped to catch his breath. The wind was sharper in the fields—cold enough to knife through you, briny with the musk of the oncoming storm.

“Callahan! Get your ass over here!”

Owen McNeal gestured sharply halfway down a row. Andrew sighed and trudged to the covers Owen and his group were working on. They were a small team of burly, tough old misers—skin dark and taunt from decades mining in the sun, blackened fingers from the old days of coal fires, hair and beards coarse with brine and salt.

“You should’ve been here an hour ago, you idiot.” Burly in his ragged, filthy shirt-sleeves and dusty pants, Owen glowered down at Andrew. “Fifty vats to cover, and I’ll be damned if the rain isn’t drowning us in ten minutes! Where the hell were you?”

“Got caught up, that’s all.”

Andrew bent to help Bertrand move the roof, sliding it on wheels until it locked safely into place. Bertrand smiled at him, patting him on the shoulder with a fragile hand—he was older than most workers; stringy gray hair almost gone, chin soft and dappled like a grandmother’s.

“Caught up!” Spit flew from Owen’s mouth. He jabbed his finger in Andrew’s face, ragged fingernail catching his cheekbone and nearly taking an eye out. “You listen here, kid. I took you on because your mama begged me. But don’t think I won’t kick your ass back home if you keep giving me the slip. Got caught up! In a storm like this!”

Andrew bit the inside of his cheek. It wasn't until he helped move another roof—shoulders already beginning to ache, biceps straining, calves burning—that he felt calm enough to offer what he knew Owen wanted to hear.

"I'm sorry, Owen." His father's voice whispered in his ear: *Big men love making other guys weak. Show them how pitiful you are, they'll be so pleased they'll stop hurting you. You got me, kid?* Andrew forced his voice to wobble, just a bit. "I should've come right away, you're right. Please, sir, I need this job—"

Owen spat. "Damn fool. You need it so bad, why're you running around playing that damn game of yours?" Andrew nearly tripped over the roof in surprise. Owen noticed and laughed. He had a deep, rumbling laugh, the kind of sound you expected to come from someone who saved stray kittens and gave money to penniless orphans. "Yeah, I know what you do when you should be working. You're, what, fifteen now? When are you going to drop the kid act and start working like a man?"

Andrew bristled. "I work hard!"

The roof snapped into place. They were nearly at the end of the row. Five more to go, but a faint, cold drizzle already fell in a gray mist across the field. Andrew gnawed on the inside of his cheek, insidious guilt worming through his gut. If he'd been here sooner, they might be done already.

But—the crack of the ball! The burn in his lungs! The sweet pressure of Thomas' hand. He clutched the memories like a miser with his last pennies.

"Every year we mine more for less money, and you're running around hitting a ball instead of providing for your mama like you should." Owen's biceps bulged as he slotted another roof into place—he could nearly lift it by himself. "You're all she's got, kid. Your daddy's rolling in his grave, I bet."

"You shut up about my dad."

"Keep that smart mouth closed, boy. Without me, you and your mama would be starving in the streets. If you're not *real* careful, you still could be. You hear me?" When Andrew glared at him, refusing to move to the next roof, Owen's lip pulled back in a snarl. "I said, do you hear me?"

Thunder rumbled. The bitter drizzle grew heavier, threatening to turn into real rain. Bodies hustled around them, working in tandem, shouting and heaving and laughing. The other men on the team looked between Owen and Andrew. Bertrand put a restraining hand on Owen's shoulder.

"He's just a boy, Mr. Dunlop. And I hear he's damn good at baseball—my grandboy says he hits the ball straight into the trees. In a few years, he could go join one of the big city teams."

Owen shrugged off Bertrand's hand. "This lazy little shit? He wouldn't last two seconds in the city. His mama would whip him bloody if he dared go."

Bertrand sighed. "Salt won't last forever, Owen. Every year the prices drop more. It's good for the kids to dream."

Owen spat into the dirt. “Dreams,” he scoffed. “Dreams won’t feed his mama. Hard work will. Well, boy? You coming?”

Andrew gritted his teeth. But he followed Owen to the next roof without another word.

Andrew’s house was a shack on the outskirts of the saltworks shanty town, held up by mud and spite. It flooded every time it rained—by the time he arrived back, water already rushed across their grubby floor and trickled in through the corners of the disintegrating roof. Andrew shivered. The clouds finally broke halfway home, dumping rain everywhere, and his wet clothes stuck to his skin.

His mother stood in the kitchen, arms caged over her chest, mouth pursed. She was taller than most women and skinny as a piece of yarn, all knots and angles. Her hair had been yellow once—Andrew remembered it like a dream, before his father’s death—but now the heavy knot gathered at the nape of her neck was a washed-out non-color.

“What’s this I hear about you playing that fool game instead of working?” she snapped as he toed off his ragged shoes. They slopped onto the floor, heavy with water and trailing mud. “Widow Yates said you got a talking to from Owen!”

Andrew straightened. Even standing at his tallest, he only came to his mother’s chin. One day, he would be able to look her in the eye as a true man—what would she do then?

“It was nothing,” he said. “Owen just got mad.”

“Mad! Damn it, Andy!” Crack! Andrew jumped as she slapped her palm on the counter. “I swear to the Lord I don’t know what goes through that mind of yours. Do you know how much begging it took to get that job?”

“Owen never lets me forget,” Andrew muttered.

“You should be grateful for work at all,” he mother snapped back, fierce. “Wasting money to play that silly game when there’s food that needs putting on the table—”

“It’s not *silly*.”

She hissed through her teeth. Rumbling thunder filled the silence between them. His mother forcibly let out a breath.

“Go get those wet things off,” she said. “Then you come back here.”

Bile spiked in his stomach. “Ma—“

She took his elbow, gripping until the bone creaked beneath her pincer-like grip. He swallowed the noise of pain from long practice. She stabbed her other finger in his chest, bony nail sharp through the thin fabric of his shirt.

“You put your things away,” she said through gritted teeth. “Then you’ll come out and take your punishment. Do you hear me?”

He swallowed. “Yes, ma’am.”

She squeezed his elbow again and he bore through the bright flash of pain until she released him.

“Good. *Go.*”

Andrew scrambled for his room. His elbow throbbed in time with his heart—he’d have a bruise tomorrow. More than a bruise. His mother had tried many punishments on him over the years, but eventually they’d narrowed to the one she knew would actually work—if only because Andrew hated it so much. He swallowed hard around his dry throat and tried to force the panicked animal of his brain to focus. She was worse if he made her wait.

His room was tiny and sparse—no window, just a tiny, lump bed with its faded quilt. Before Andrew’s father died, they’d rescued an old, distinguished cabinet from the landfill and spent the better part of a day dragging it home. It protected all of his worldly possessions: precious marbles collected during the old days of school lunches, the miniscule portrait of his father he’d stolen from his mother’s trunk, the faded books Bertrand gave him for his last birthday, his church clothes—getting too short in the arms and legs and tight across the shoulders—and his lucky rocks.

Rain pattered the roof and a thin stream of water trickled through a corner of his floor. Andrew pulled on his one clean shirt and pants and slicked back his wet hair so it didn’t drip in his face. His shivering tapered off. He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes and waited until his breath steadied before going back out.

His mother stood by the empty fireplace. Kerchief tied over her hair, sleeves rolled back, switch waiting in her hand. Ready for work. Andrew’s feet turned to lead, his belly to acid.

“Ma—”

The switch whistled through the air. Andrew flinched back.

“Don’t start.” His mother’s anger had hardened like water left out in winter. “Turn to the wall.”

Andrew didn’t move. “It was just a game,” he said. “I’m sorry, I really am. But I did *good*, Ma. I scored twice, I won the game for us.” He hated the little kid panic in his voice. “I’m good at it.”

His stomach dropped as she scoffed. The storm outside washed away everything, leaving their living room muted and gray. His mother’s pale face was almost colorless in the dim light.

“What good does that do us?”

“I could—” He hesitated. Swallowed. “I could go to the city. Join a team.”

His mother stared. Her big, pale eyes narrowed.

“Turn around,” she said. “Put your hands on the wall.”

“Ma—”

“Your daddy, rest his soul, filled your fool head with dreams,” she said. “But he’s gone now, Andy. No more dreaming.”

Everything Andrew wanted to shout—that his father had loved him and he had been the only person he’d ever known who treated him like he mattered; that his death was still an ever-present wound, open and festering; that he was good at baseball and if he got even better he might actually be able to leave and see the world that existed—that *must* exist—outside the saltworks; that if his mother

just listened to him, actually *listened*, just for a minute, she might be able to understand the hungry beast in Andrew's chest who yearned to go out into that world and conquer—all of it jumbled together in one sodden mass of words that never made it past Andrew's throat. He gritted his teeth until they creaked.

“Fine,” he said and turned to face the wall.

When the house went dark and quiet, Andrew rose from his bed and dressed in his ruined clothes. His back stung as he pulled on his damp shirt and he hissed under his breath. Ignoring the throb of his shoulders and spine, he edged his way into the living room. He almost made it to the door when he smacked his foot against a table and swore.

“Where are you going?”

He jumped. His mother, dressed in a white shift, pale hair braided away from her sharp face—ghostly and unreal in the wavering shadows of the candle she held as she frowned out at him from her bedroom door.

He couldn't lie to her. “Back to the field. My bat's still out there.”

“Your *bat*? Lord help me.”

“I can't buy another one.”

“Good! Didn't I just teach you this lesson? God, you're stubborn as a mule.” She rubbed her temple. “Go back to bed, Andy. You have work in the morning.”

“No. It'll get ruined.” He turned for the door. “I'll be back soon.”

“Andrew!”

He gritted his teeth. “One day, I'll get out of here,” he swore. He couldn't look at her, so he told it to the door. “You'll wake up and I'll be gone, free of—of you and Owen and the fucking salt. That's not a dream, Ma. That's a promise.”

He tore out of the house before she could say anything else or grab him. She yelled after him, but whatever she said was lost in the rush of rain and thunder.

The wind howled, whipping against his eyes and cheeks. Overhead, lightning cracked, forked and wild. Thunder followed, rumbling in Andrew's ribs. No stars, no moon—he relied on the flashes of lightning and his own sense-memory to make the journey back down the dirt path, across the salt vats, to the little field beyond.

It had transformed into a lake, sloshing with water, mud, and grass. Andrew spent the better part of an hour on his hands and knees looking for his bat. He knocked over tin cans, grabbed fistfuls of grass and mud, and he almost gave up hope when his knuckles knocked into wet wood. He fumbled to grab it with numb fingers and lifted it from the mud. Beloved, familiar weight in his hands. Yes, this was his bat. He pressed it to his cheek. Not lost. Not yet.

His back burned. For the past hour, he'd gone over his mother's words again and again, ballooning with something bilious and feral until he couldn't stand his own rage any longer. Holding the bat helped in some way, like a lightning rod to his own tumultuous feelings, but his stomach still roiled.

Andrew stood, ignoring the rain and the sucking mud and the wet chill numbing his hands and nose.

He took position

Swing: his mother's wretched tears when his father died, her cold hardening in the months and years following. The ever-present switch.

Swing: Owen's leering smile. The old men in the fields still working, backs broken, fingers gnarled, still scrabbling every day just for the money for bread and nothing more.

Swing: Blood bubbling and fizzing on the home plate, with the bat in his hands, when Thomas stood too close.

Swing: His father's kind eyes and gentle hands, his mournful, hangdog face. The flutter of his stiff eyelashes when Andrew closed his eyes after finding him cold and prone in the kitchen. Heart attack.

Swing: Salt and salt and more salt. Brine seeping through his clothes until all he could smell was the fields. Trembling shoulders, aching wrists, dry eyes.

Eventually, he stopped. Panting, arms trembling with strain. Minutes or hours? Maybe he'd always been there, swinging at nothing. Lightning flashed over the copse of trees beyond the field and when Andrew looked his heart ratched into his throat. A shape, stark against the tree line. As darkness fell again, he froze, heart thumping. But—didn't the shadow look familiar, somehow?

Lightning. The shadow loomed again from the trees and Andrew's mouth filled with tangy blood as he jerked and bit his tongue. Familiar. Yes, he knew it—

He took off for the trees, slipping through the wet grass and mud, falling to his knees and straining back to his feet, panting, blood rushing in his ears. He prayed for lightning, strained in the dark to see that shadow again—the jut of its chin, the curve of its check, all of it familiar as his own hand, as the portrait he kept locked away, as the face he saw now only in his dreams—

Lightning. Andrew skidded, ankle twisting under him. He crashed to the wet ground, dropping his bat. The pain meant nothing. The shadow, the shadow—

“Father!”

No answer. Andrew strained to hear beneath the thunder, but there was only the rush of rain, the crash and shake of trees overhead. Nothing of his father's tender, slow voice. Andrew shuddered in the grass, ignoring the mud in his mouth, the throb all the way up his ankle. Stupid kid, of course there was no answer. Dead men didn't speak.

Something creaked. Lightning forked directly overhead, so bright and intense, Andrew shouted. The jagged afterimage dazzled his eyes—hairs stood up all over his body as electricity fizzled and popped the air—

Pain erupted along his skull. Darkness subsumed him.

Gentle sunlight. Andrew woke in stages, brain struggling to catch and hold the world around him, everything coming in disjointed flashes. Sunlight. Petrichor and brine. Pain. A cold wind.

He didn't know how long it took him to sit up and absorb the whole picture, but the sun was already well over the tree-line. Everything was alternately too bright or too dim, his vision spasming and throbbing.

A dead tree stood in front of him, its sturdy trunk burned to a dry, black husk. How had that happened?

Light. Pain.

Andrew's tongue was thick and tender in his mouth as he muttered, "Lightning."

At the base of the tree was a bat. Andrew's bat. Dizzy, he reached for it and cried out as it cracked to ash beneath his fingers. The bat—his pride and joy, a glorious weapon, familiar and beloved—was as dead and black as the tree. Gone.

Andrew sat at the base of the dead tree for what might have been days. Birds sang above his head, twittering and chirruping. Distant movement crackled in the undergrowth—rabbits, maybe, or squirrels. He breathed in, out. His head throbbed in time with his heart.

Standing hurt, and he hobbled on each step like an old man. Leaning on trees, trying not to trip over logs and rocks, he limped out of the forest to the salt fields.

They were full of people and activity—all the roofs rolled back to expose the briny vats, rakers working the dried out covers to collect salt to fill sturdy tin buckets. The familiar bustle and all the old men in their shirt-sleeves and suspenders, rough and dried out and brawny, soothed him.

Quietly, he turned away from the fields and followed the dirt path to the shantytown. The sun grew fat and scarlet against the horizon. Owen would be angry he'd missed the day of work. So would his mother. He kept seeing his bat crumbling away beneath his fingers, his mother's sneer. Everything in him was distorted and strange—thoughts too small, feelings too big.

He'd seen a deer in the woods, once. A fawn. Dappled brown and white, all legs and eyes. Andrew had frozen and the fawn, trembling, tumbled straight into the undergrowth, lying motionless among moss and dirt. David almost touched it, worried he'd killed it, but it made a small, keening sound when he stepped closer. He'd stuttered an apology—to who, he didn't know—and ran away before he could somehow hurt it further.

Later, his father explained. *They don't know how to protect themselves, so they hide and pray the predator will overlook them. Hope. That's how they survive.* Andrew could still feel the phantom of his father's warm palm on his head, his whisper: *I'm glad you didn't hurt it, kid. I'm proud of you.*

He wondered if the ground had felt good to that deer, safe. If he tumbled to the dirt of their house the moment his mother looked at him—would he escape notice and survive, too?

The door flew open as he approached the house. Andrew braced himself for a slap, but his mother—long hair unbraided and streaming behind her, still in her shift—only reached for him. Andrew's knees wobbled and they fell to the dirt together.

"You damn fool." Her voice cracked in the middle. When had he last seen his mother cry? Not since his father's funeral. "Where have you *been*? I thought—" She hiccuped. "I thought—"

"Ma—"

She clutched him, tucking his tender head into the curve of her shoulder. Andrew closed his eyes.

"You can't leave, Andrew. I'm dead without you, you understand?" She shook like the trees in the storm. "No money, no food. I'll starve. Is that what you want? Is that what your father would have wanted?"

Andrew's heart knifed with pain. *I'm proud of you.* The bat, the rush of incandescence, Thomas' dimpled smile—all of it rushed away from him. Not his to keep.

His eyes burned.

"I need you, Andrew." His mother pulled him closer, her grip too tight. "You can't leave me." Then, ripped out of her— "Please."

Her hands clawed at his back, reopening the cuts from the switch. Andrew shuddered and tried to swallow.

When he licked his cracked lips, all he could taste was salt.