

Stop Short

by Alex Grover

We were in high school, stars of the New Egypt Pharaohs, and we loved to drink.

SoCo, Burnette's, Grey Goose, Bacardi. The good stuff. We drank Bill's stuff because his parents were lawyers and loved to drink too. We just drank when everyone was asleep. Sometimes we'd invite our friends, or girls—but mostly it was just us. You could get away with this shit when you were the celebrity pitcher for your hometown baseball team. It was the same for Tom, who was the home-run hitter, and Bill, who was the speedy short stop.

The three of us were perfect.

"Gimme the bottle, Ken!" Bill yelled at me as I held onto that Grey Goose for dear life. I grappled the cold glass with the sandy etching of the gray forest as I attempted another swig.

"No, you asshole!" I yelled back. I had the drunken gleam in my eyes—I could tell from the dizziness—and I had the flushed feeling of a young god—I could tell from the heat in my cheeks at the time. I laughed and laughed as Bill tried for the bottle.

"Dick!"

We did this most weekends. Because we played baseball, we thought we required special attention for our livers. I absolutely loved it. I guess I was your standard jerk back then.

Tom didn't do a thing. He just sat in his own corner of Bill's garage, taking swigs of SoCo alone. He rarely talked.

"How is it, Tom?" I asked. Then I howled. I almost broke the goose.

"It tastes terrible, Ken" Tom said. "I hate it."

"Then why drink it?" I pulled my chair closer to Tom as Bill continued to lunge for the Grey Goose. "Why drink something you hate?"

"It's all we have, right?"

Tom had short, brown hair. Buzz-cut style. Trimmed neck. Some facial acne. Clean ears. Strong chin. Big shoulders. Sad face. Always

a sad face. But he charmed the ladies. He always coaxed the nerdy girls from their shells, or the popular girls from their mountains. He had even dated the sassy trumpet-player girl who hated everyone. Tom always tricked them with his depressing looks. I used to be jealous, though now I see past the front. I don't know who the girls thought he was.

After he punched me, Bill took the bottle. I thought he was going to put it away. He didn't. He just took another drink.

"Can't wait to whoop the Tigers again." Bill nodded with a smile.

"I hope they postpone that Caterpillars game," Tom said, disregarding Bill. Tom was worried like Bill and I, but hell, I didn't want to talk about the Caterpillars. Neither did Bill. We both knew they were going to mow us down. They were the hardest team in our division.

Bill tried again. "The Tigers can't do shit to the Pharaohs," Bill said.

"Nor the Bullriders," I added.

"Nor the Spartans," Tom said.

"Tom, we have that Grey Goose," I said, pointing to Bill's bottle.

"It's mine, Ken!" Bill lamented. "You should have bought your own stuff. You're lucky I hate SoCo."

Bill had reddish-brown hair. He was the scarecrow that would stick his lanky arms out and give you a big hug. He was a wild drunk. He would drink every night of the week. He would drink before games, and he'd still have good legs to run around in the baseball dirt. The kind of guy Bill was happened to hate the kind of guy Tom was. He thought Tom was pitiful. He didn't him at all, *especially* not after hearing about every single one-night-stand and dirty hand job Tom had woefully managed. Bill always yelled at Tom for not realizing his own sexual prowess.

Tom always shrugged.

"You're lucky to be alive," Tom whispered. And I stopped. I stopped laughing, and reminiscing about the shitty baseball teams that played *us* during the prior weeks.

"What the hell does that mean, Tom?" I asked. It was somewhere in the middle of the morning, and Bill's eyes were wretched and crusty. The garage was bare and cold. Tom didn't say much more. Not until Bill spoke.

"Yeah," Bill said, "you act like we're dying."

Tom sighed.

"But we are." And that's what he said, drunk like me. The home-run wonder. The lonely boy that screwed the pretty girls.

"We'll die one day," Bill said, swilling some of the goose. Tom took another shot of SoCo. I watched, licking my lips, wanting more.

"It's going to happen sooner than you think," Tom muttered. He took the bottle of comfort and chugged it five seconds worth.

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You could say I was a drunk. You could also say that I was good-looking at one point, and that I had opportunities. I used to almost have a six-pack. I used to lift two-fifty on the press, and I used to squat with one-twenties. I would walk with those weights all across New Egypt. I had to—I needed good arms and good legs. Now my skin is weepy and shriveled. I don't care, though; things are different for me these days.

It didn't take long that night until I was terribly drunk. I think Bill had already reached his plateau; he wasn't a cheerful part of the conversation as he had been. He just sat on the floor, looking at the shadows.

It must have been Tom's charm that inspired me to leave. Or maybe it was Bill's sullenness. Or both. Whatever was the case, I decided to jog.

"What?" Tom had asked.

"Yup," I declared. "Going for a jog."

"Have funghn," Bill mumbled. Then his head drooped.

"Sure!" I yelled. I laughed in Tom's face, and he didn't move. Bill looked like a dumpy zombie with the case of the runs. So sullen.

So I ran down the street. It looked like a giant black slugger with its famous logo etched off, with me running through the splinters.

I remembered the game with the Tigers, and I chuckled.

I passed a stop sign. I kept going. I didn't know where.
I saw mansions at first. Then the nicer, smaller homes.
Then I saw working-class dominoes stacked to the brim.
I passed another stop sign. I kept on going.

I thought about baseball again. How tough we seemed as the star players. How outfielders face the crowd alone, waiting for miracles to fall into their hands. Or maybe beers.

The whole time I'd jogged, I'd forgotten about Bill and Tom.

At one moment during the jog, my ankles began to quake, and my eyes zeroed in on bright lights in the distance. As the pain progressed in my legs, the lights soared closer; *that's* how it went for the rest of the jog.

I went along a large stretch of road, and before I turned past a great sound barrier that protected the suburbs from the small highway, my Achilles' tendon gave through and I fell on the ground.

After my muscles released their grudges, I crept back up and I found the fiery lights of Central Pyramid University, our local, public school of design. The lights overtook me. The dizziness dipped me into nausea. The thoughts of my career leapt towards me from the shadows that the university had made. Until that moment, I hadn't thought about my future.

Overwhelmed, I threw up.

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Ankles bitten by duress, I came back that night to find Tom asleep on the garage floor. His eyes were still, and his lips formed a grimace. Bill was gone from the garage, but his clothes, including his red-striped boxers, had been flung into a chaotic pile just near the humming fridge, which welcomed me with its open and freezing door.

Looking at the rest of the alcohol inside, I'd gagged and closed it deftly.

I had figured that Bill was asleep. Hopefully resting in his king-sized bed. But when I went into the house to wash my face and rinse my mouth, I also found Bill completely naked, watching TV, sprawled out on his plastic-covered couch.

"Unghh," Bill moaned, cradling the almost-empty bottle of Southern Comfort under his right arm. His junk looked cold and shriveled. His eyes were closed and full of sleep-mucus. His hair was a dull brown in the light of the TV.

"You okay, Bill?" I'd said. I had forgotten about my need to cleanse my mouth.

"Unghh?" he had asked me.

I found a blanket for Bill and wrapped him gently, though he still shivered. I thought about the jog. Then I looked at Bill, resolving to toss the bottle of Comfort.

