Diamond Dash

by David Hicks

DIAMOND DASH

During the long wait in line with thousands of children and their parents and guardians, a line that wrapped all the way around Shea Stadium and then some, I had twice resolved to leave, had twice determined that the “Diamond Dash” following the game just couldn't be worth it, standing for over an hour like this in the Flushing heat. I also knew that in order to establish a trusting co-parenting relationship with my soon-to-be-ex wife, I needed to bring our son back *on time* after such special outings. But Ethan, who was six and a half, had insisted it *would* be worth it, whatever it was; so we persisted, shuffling our feet forward every few seconds, Ethan standing behind me, holding on to the sides of my tee shirt, burying his face into the small of my back as he matched his steps with mine.

As we neared the centerfield gate, he took my hand, and when we finally walked onto the playing field and heard the stadium usher say *Stay on the warning track please this way*, my son pulled away from me and broke into a slow, almost stationary, trot.

I had left my marriage over a year earlier, when Ethan was five and a half and Janey, my daughter, not even two. It was in January 2008, following the miserable Christmas when Ethan and I shared a stomach virus and took turns vomiting all night. I had already decided to leave, and was feeling miserable about it, guilty as sin, but chose to wait until after the holidays because I didn't want my children to have such a lousy memory attached to that happy time of year. Two weeks later, after putting the kids to bed, I spent an hour in the basement, sitting on the concrete floor with my head in my hands. I couldn't bear to hurt Rachel, couldn't fathom what this would do to my children—I guess you could say that being a father was *who I was*—but I also couldn't continue live the way I was living.

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/david-hicks/diamond-dash--2»*
Copyright © 2013 David Hicks. All rights reserved.

I had lost fifty pounds, I had been crying every night for over a year, I was getting ferocious migraines twice a week, and I was utterly unable to manufacture any feelings of love for my wife. After standing on the Bear Mountain Bridge one day, staring at the Hudson River rushing underneath me, I knew it had all become unbearable.

Finally I got up off the basement floor, trudged upstairs, told Rachel I no longer loved her, then begged her to keep the noise down as she heaved the coffee table at me and started screaming, threatening to wake the kids if I didn't get out of her house immediately. I spent the night at my mother's, my head in the crook of my arm, feeling like the worse person who had ever lived.

The next day, after being told that Ethan was distraught and I'd better be the one to explain it all to him, I picked him up and drove him to the pizzeria. He bent his head as I ordered us a couple of slices, then kept it bent as I guided him to a booth. By the wall was a kid around Ethan's age playing a video game, firing at men who popped up out of nowhere. In a split second the kid had to decide if it was a hero or villain, then shoot or hold fire.

Our pizza slices sat on paper plates before us.

“I'm not leaving *you*,” I told him. “I'm leaving Mom. Your mother.” I checked the urge to call the whole thing off, to promise him I would come back home immediately, to tell him it had all been a big mistake. I sought out his eyes, hidden under his baseball cap. But when he looked up at me, I looked away.

“You're leaving *me*,” he said. He lowered his head and started crying, his face dissolving, his breath grating and catching in his throat. I reached out to keep his forehead from touching the pizza sauce. “I woke up and you were gone,” he said through his chokes. “Mom said you just left us.”

I considered explaining how his mother and I had been too young to marry, how we hadn't yet learned to love ourselves, how we had fought all the time before he was born, and afterwards kept it all in so it came out in bitter parries and brutal asides, delivered with sarcastic smiles. I considered telling him how important it was to

love, deeply love, the person he married, to make sure. I considered apologizing for ruining his life; the articles I'd been reading all concluded that children of divorced households were far more likely to become addicted to drugs, commit violent crimes, and grow into coldhearted atheists who hated their fathers.

Ethan lifted his head. “Hey, why don't you just come back?”

He thought the solution so simple that, for a moment, his eyes brimmed with certainty. But when they met mine they again collapsed, and his tears dropped down onto the oil of his pizza, his shoulders convulsing. *Nothing will ever be as hard as this*, I wanted to tell him, but I knew that would be a lie. Instead I just watched as he slipped away from me across the table, the space between us opening like a canyon, and I understood that nothing for him would be easy for a long time, and nothing I could say would help. All the months I had considered leaving, all the inner debates and bargaining . . . I had known it would destroy him, and that alone had kept me from acting on it. But I had never put a face to the destruction. Here it was, in front of me, and I had at the ready no offerings of solace or hope.

As soon as we stepped through the centerfield gate and entered the ballpark, I saw how the Diamond Dash worked. The line of kids and adults followed the warning track to the rightfield corner, then turned and headed towards first base, where the children made a sharp right and took off, dashing around the bases, while parents and guardians continued to stroll towards home, watching and shouting encouragement, until meeting their little ones at the plate and ushering them out of the ball park. A dash around the diamond.

Ethan quickened his pace.

One Saturday in June, five months after I left, Ethan and I had sat together on the baseball field at Silver Lake Park, not far from our house.

“Are those the same swans we saw last time?” Ethan asked, pointing at the lake.

I looked over and nodded, and then noticed, at the other end of the lake, a car that looked a lot like Rachel's. Fire-engine red. It rolled slowly on the shoulder, then stopped under a tree. “They're beautiful,” I said. “Though territorial.” Ethan threw the baseball up in the air and caught it in his new glove, waiting for me to define *territorial*. Then his little fist clenched around the ball. I told him the swans seem to decide the pond is theirs, and then dominate it. “They kill ducklings at night,” I said. I gestured as if I were putting his little head under water. “They hold them under and drown them.”

“Why don't the ducks just stick together and fight back?” Ethan asked.

I watched the swans swim in unison, dipping their long necks toward each other—such grace, such enmity. “I guess they're afraid,” I said.

“Do you still not love Mom?” Ethan asked.

“I'm so sorry,” I said, glancing across the lake. “I don't.”

“Do you love someone else now?” He looked away as he asked this.

I hesitated. There was a woman, the Director of Student Activities at Fairfield University, where I taught. We had talked a lot, and it had been a possibility; once I left my marriage, we would go out on a few dates and see what came of it. But right after I left Rachel, she had taken up with her old boyfriend, and refused to answer my calls. For a while I kept up hope—maybe she didn't trust that I had left for good—but then I saw her on campus, and she had a glittering diamond on her finger.

“No,” I told Ethan.

After that, I had tried to contact a woman I had met when I was in graduate school, back in the Village; she had big black eyes, pools of sorrow, that had haunted me for seven years. But her name was so common that I couldn't find her on Facebook, and while I saw that she had graduated NYU with her masters in comparative literature, she seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth after that—or gotten married and changed her name.

Ethan was shifting his weight, standing on the dusty base path between first and second, pounding the glove with his little fist. I was sitting on the infield grass, a few feet away.

"Mom still loves you," he said, "even though you left." He kicked the bat with his foot. "So now you must love her again if you don't love anyone else. You have to love someone."

I tore up some grass, fisted it in my hand. "I love you and Janey," I said.

Ethan shook off his glove and picked up his new bat. He tried to toss the ball in the air and hit it, but each time, he swung and missed. After the fourth miss, he flung the bat as far as he could. "I *hate* this bat!" he said, his face reddening. "It's too *heavy.*"

I could see that the bat, which I had given him for Christmas, *was* too heavy, and that his arms were in discord with the rest of his body, but that soon, in a few years perhaps, he would be strong enough to rip line drives with a smooth, level stroke. But who would teach him how to swing, how to shift his weight from back leg to front, how to follow the ball with his eyes right into the catcher's mitt?

Ethan crumpled to the ground and began flinging pebbles and clumps of dirt.

"I was lying on the floor every night," I told him after a while. "After I read to you and rubbed your back. After you fell asleep. After your mom fell asleep." I began to curl my face into my armpit, in imitation of how I must have looked on the floor, but then stopped. I looked back over to the swans.

"If you come back," Ethan said, "I'll be good all the time and you won't be sad like that. And if you do get sad you can just come in bed with me like you used to and I'll rub *your* back now."

I shook my head, looking at the torn grass in my hand. If I returned, nothing would change. In all our marriage-counseling sessions, and in all my exchanges with Rachel, one thing she had never said was *Hey, I can try. I can change. Let's give it a shot. I'll try to respect your opinion more. I'll do my share of the child-care*

and try not to be so bossy. I'll try to let you in, to confide in you, to seek your help. And here's what I need from you.

"Mom says you're going to hell," Ethan said.

A cyclist rode by, heading toward a dirt path into the woods. Ethan and I had ventured down the path many times, but I still didn't know where it ended up. The last time we had walked there, he had found a butterfly on the ground, its wing bent. He thought that by picking it up and holding it, he could save it.

On the rightfield wall of Shea Stadium were the jersey numbers and names of the most famous Mets: Casey Stengel, Gil Hodges, Tom Seaver. Men who played before my time; men of strength, confidence, humor, and grace. I bent down in mid-stride to scoop up a bit of clay from the track, and Ethan paused and turned back, holding out his hand so I would hurry, so we would not lose our place in line.

"Why did that man call it a warning track?" he asked as we crunched alongside the outfield wall, and I heard his question in some arid distance, as if he had asked in his thin voice through a tin can on a string from his room back in White Plains all the way to the other tin can where we were now in Queens.

When he was four, Ethan and I sat on the living-room couch one afternoon as I prepared for the class I was teaching that night. Ethan was reading a pop-up ABC book featuring a variety of animals and insects, and Rachel was in the family room, blasting an old Pat Benatar CD while vacuuming the carpet. We had just found out she was pregnant again.

Ethan was inventing a narrative to go with the pictures of the insects, occasionally identifying a letter. "B," he called out over the loud music, "Butterfly. Butterflies are pretty. They fly with their pretty wings and drink all the flowers." He flipped the page.

I put my finger to my lips and shushed him as I went back over the page I was trying to read. I was completely unprepared for my three-hour class; I hadn't even re-read the novel I was teaching, to

say nothing of how I was going to fill three hours teaching it. “Go in your room if you want to read out loud,” I said. The music pounded. The vacuum whined.

“C. Crocodile. Butterflies like to visit their friend Mister Crocodile.” Another turn of another page.

“Ethan, please. Daddy's trying to work.” I held the book closer to my face. *Love is a battlefield.*

“D,” he said next. “Doggie. Daddy Doggie.” He hadn't even turned the page. “Daddy Doggie is cranky today.” He raised his voice to be heard over the music, craning his neck so his lips came close to my ear. “HE CAN'T EVEN SEE THE PRETTY COLORS OF—”

I snapped my book shut and clamped my hand over Ethan's mouth, forcing his head against the back of the couch. His eyes widened. He couldn't breathe.

“*Now will you be quiet?*” I hissed.

“It's so the outfielders know the wall is coming,” I said, and I was ready to explain how they shoot a quick glance to locate it while running back, then refocus on the ball in flight while reaching out at the last second to brace themselves for the collision. I was ready to tell Ethan that I myself had been an outfielder once, and that when I raced back for a long fly ball I'd feel the crunch *one two three* and know when the wall was coming. I was ready to tell him how once, at a field where there was no warning track, I had sprinted back for a long fly ball and crashed into the fence, hurting my shoulder and missing the ball—*And so sometimes, you see, there is no warning*—but Ethan was looking up now and wondering about something else, like how the stadium lights had come on even though the game was over and it was still light outside, so I didn't tell him any of those things.

As we reached the rightfield corner and turned toward home, I strayed from the path to step on the outfield grass, to feel it under my feet. When I was around Ethan's age, my father had taken me to Fan Appreciation Day at this stadium, and while I don't remember anything about either game of the doubleheader, I do remember that

between games, clutching the wooden stake of the poster I had made, I had walked across this same field—a field that would soon be gone, as a new stadium was about to be built in its place. On that day, I had been ushered to a long line of kids outside the stadium that led to the same centerfield gates Ethan and I had just walked through, and we had been divided into two lines, one streaming towards first base, the other towards third. For days I had dreamed of feeling the grass beneath my feet, of seeing my heroes watching me from the dugout, appreciating my poster. But once on the field, I found myself frantically searching for my father in the stands. I walked the length of the outfield grass and entered the infield, holding my poster with both hands, searching out the area where we'd been sitting, trying in vain to locate his maroon windbreaker. By the time I reached third base, I had dropped the poster and was running towards the exit behind home plate. When I found my father—standing at a reasonable distance from the rest of the parents, a snuffed-out cigarette at his feet—I clasped my arms around him, breathing in his familiar, musky smell.

A month after I left, Ethan and I sat on my bed in my new tiny apartment in east White Plains, in a little cottage that had once been the horse groomer's quarters, about forty yards from the main house, where a middle-aged divorcee lived. The kids and I had just been outside, planting seeds in a garden the owner had given me permission to work on: at first I had scooped out holes with a spade while Ethan dropped in seeds, and then we switched roles, all the while keeping an eye on Janey to make sure she didn't put any dirt in her mouth. Now inside and freshly bathed, she sat on the floor in her pajamas, watching a Winnie the Pooh video, while Ethan showed me some drawings he had made in his first-grade class. In one of them, stick figures in red crayon stood side by side on orange construction paper. There was a mommy, with a red smile and a tuft of blonde hair; a daddy, tall, with dark hair; a chubby baby in a stroller; and a little boy, the slightest of them all. A strange man stood between the boy and the daddy, a thick grin plastering his

face. The tallest member of this crayon portrait, he was clearly not a member of the family. And although the stranger was laughing, his head was on fire. An orange blaze raged up from inside his skull, the top of which had been blown off.

I pointed to the strange man. “Who's this?” I said.

Ethan looked puzzled. “That's a man with his head on fire.”

I looked at the other drawings: a cow with green stripes, a boy with hands so fat they blotted out the scenery. I thought, maybe sometimes a man with his head on fire is just a man with his head on fire.

But the day after I had left, the day we had gone to the pizzeria, Ethan had stopped on our way out and kicked the soda machine as hard as he could.

“Are you angry that I left?” I asked.

“No,” Ethan said. “Just sad sometimes, but I see you almost every day and Joey Vinnola says you're better than his dad because his dad is always working—”

I gathered him to me in the middle of this and hugged him. “It's okay if you're angry,” I said. “In fact, it would be weird if you weren't.”

“Okay but I'm not,” Ethan said. “You're the best dad ever.”

I gazed at his mushroom-cut hair, his spindly body, his wet mouth opened in an O—and at the baby teeth inside, all making way for grown-up teeth. *You have no idea how amazing you are*, I wanted to say*. You're already a better person than I am.*

“Hey,” Ethan said, his eyes widening, “why don't I just live here with you?” He stood up and rapidly patted my knee. “We could play catch in the back where all the grass is and you could read to me every night and we could watch Thomas the Tank Engine videos . . . ”

I touched my finger to his lips.

“Why don't you want me to live here?” he asked, slapping away my hand. “Why don't you tell Mom you want me to live with you?”

I stared at him for a moment. If I could pry open the top of his head, would an orange fire leap out and devour us both?

“Ethan,” I said. “You're the best boy. The very best boy. In the whole wide world.”

A month or two after he was born, I had brought Ethan to the couch with me at three in the morning, after the clangy radiator in his room had awakened him from a deep sleep. I shuffled into the kitchen, holding him in one hand while getting his bottle ready with the other. His cracked screaming in my ear, I plucked the bottle from the hot water, squeezed a drop onto my wrist, arranged him in the crook of my arm, placed the nipple in his mouth, and made my way over to the couch. “Ethan's the best boy,” I sang to him, “the very best boy in the whole wide world.” I found an old movie on television as he slurped the formula. As he fell asleep in the middle of it, waking up in time to belch into my face, spit up onto my shoulder and fall asleep again on my chest, his heart beating rapidly against mine, a wave of tenderness came over me, and with that, the certainty that he and I had just sealed something, something permanent, something more solid and unbreakable than a wedding vow.

Near first base there was a sign directing *Parents and Guardians* to *pick up your children at home plate*. When we reached the sign, Ethan, no need for directions, broke away from me, and as he ran in the line with the other kids, I surveyed the other adults, wondering which were parents and which were guardians, which were heroes and which were villains. Then I turned and noticed my dashing son.

At first Ethan ran with his fists closed and legs windmilling, knees and elbows jutting out as he followed the kid in front of him. The rest of the parents and guardians strolled to home plate, looking right and cheering encouragement, while I stood arrested at first base. For just before reaching second, just as Ethan had dashed past the taller boy in front of him, a strange thing had

happened: his body had begun to collect itself, had come together in flight.

I saw his chin rise, shoulders relax, and fists open as he took the inside corner of the second-base bag with the side of his right foot—*Where had he learned that?*—and pass two more dashers, then accelerate confidently past an entire line of kids—tall kids and short, bad kids and good, kids of all colors, kids with stepdads or stepmoms, kids with single moms or single dads, kids with no parents at all, kids with parents who hated each other, kids with parents who loved each other. As he rounded third, the Mets' third-base coach smacked him on the ass, and as he streaked towards home he lifted his arms, the gallant victor in the throes of his own grace, and smiled a smile of triumph, of freedom, of an escape from suffering. And when he alighted in the air above home plate, hovering like a butterfly and landing so lightly it could hardly count as a run, he didn't seem to notice that his father wasn't where he was supposed to be—that he was still standing by first base as parents and guardians streamed by him, a man who seemed to have popped up out of nowhere, neither hero nor villain, grinding some warning-track dirt in his fist and watching his son from a reasonable distance.