

Extra Ticket

by Josh Denslow

My best friend died yesterday. His name was Franklin Seever, but we all called him Lin. It started when we were in Little League. There were two Franklins on the team so Coach, who was my dad, called the fat one Frank and my best friend Lin. It fit him because Lin threw like a girl. And if his shoe came untied during a game, his mom ran out onto the field and tied it for him. We were ten at the time.

When I turn nineteen next week, I'll be older than he'll ever be. Eighteen forever, I guess. This is how he died: He choked on a popcorn kernel. Man, if he was alive, he'd laugh so hard if he heard that's the way someone went. Might even laugh if he heard that was the way he went. Here's the fucked-up part. I was over there yesterday about two hours before it happened. I even forgot my cell phone there. Here's the conversation we had:

Lin: Marcy told me that she blew her ex-boyfriend the last time she saw him.

Me: So?

Lin: The last time she saw him was like six months after we hooked up.

Me: Why would she do that?

Lin: How the fuck would I know?

And the whole time I'm tossing my cell phone up in the air and catching it. I love when it snaps open in midair and I catch it perfectly as if I'm just going to start talking. That would be a kick-ass way to answer the phone.

Oh, so then he started crying. And I saw this flipbook in my head of all the times I had seen him cry over the years. Except this time was different. He didn't make any noise — it was like his face froze. His mouth was open and I could see a few of his fillings in his teeth, then this tear squeezed out of the side of his left eye and shot down his face and stopped on his chin, just hanging there. Then the other

eye did the same thing. But his eyes were staring straight ahead, toward the closet. I didn't know what to do.

I think this is what I said: You want me to call your mom? She had let me in so I knew she was downstairs watching some game show on TV.

He continued to stare at the closet. So I opened it. It was a total mess in there. Clothes were all over the floor. It felt good not to be looking at Lin anymore. I scanned the top shelf and saw his old baseball mitt wedged in between his snow boots and a box of dusty cassette tapes. I pulled it down and jammed my hand inside. It almost fit. It felt warm in there as if Lin had taken it off moments before, not eight years ago. And I think that's when I put my cell phone down.

Standing in his closet with that mitt on, I remembered the time I hit a homerun when the bases were loaded and then because of an error Lin made we lost the game.

I turned around and Lin was still sitting on the edge of his bed, but he seemed to have wiped his face off a bit. He said: Are we on for that concert tomorrow?

I said: Sure.

He followed that up with: You know I bought Marcy a ticket?

So I said: Let's just ditch her.

He nodded. Then his face froze again so I walked out. And now I'll never see him again.

Marcy stopped by this morning and said she'd been calling me and Lin and couldn't reach us. That's when I realized I left my cell phone at Lin's. I figured he hadn't been answering her call because of the whole blow job thing. I didn't know he was dead yet. Neither did his mom. Not for like another ten minutes when she finally went into his room to wake him up.

I can picture his mom. Probably wearing one of those loose-fitting floral nightgowns she always wore when we were growing up. The kind she bought in bulk at Target for \$4.99 apiece. One time I told Lin that the first nipple I ever saw was his mom's and he got really pissed. But it was true. She was popping popcorn on the

stove, which seems kind of ironic now, and she began shaking the pan vigorously and her breast sort of poked out of the top of her nightgown. It's not like I was looking. It's not like she was Jeff Danzinger's mom or something. Lin's mom looks like everybody else's mom. I mean, I never even thought of her having nipples.

Anyway I can see her walking up the stairs, wheezing a bit because she has gained quite a bit of weight over the last few years. And then she opens the door and she yells: Get up, lazy. You're wasting valuable job hunting time. Or I'm sure she said something like that. She was always talking about Lin getting a job.

And I can picture Lin lying there, looking like he was sleeping. But I wonder if he had changed a weird color because he choked last night. And wouldn't he still have his jeans on? And he probably wouldn't be under the covers or anything.

So Marcy was all concerned because Lin had the tickets and she really wanted to go to the concert. I guess she was thinking we'd probably ditch her. I told her I'd call her later. That's when the phone rang. Which was weird because the house phone never rings. Dad actually gives Mom a hard time for even still having one. It's for emergencies, she always says. And this was an emergency.

When my mom came up twenty minutes later to tell me about Lin, I was in the bathroom jerking off to his girlfriend. Marcy is actually pretty hot. She has this long blonde hair and these pink lips that curve at the top like a movie star. She's also really skinny which I like a lot. She looks like she could fit through the bars of the bike rack at the library. Just from my mom's voice I could tell she was crying. So I put my pants back on and washed my hands and opened the door. At first I thought Dad had died. It seemed pretty possible. The doctors were always telling him to exercise and eat less red meat. In the last few years he's started to look like one of those weebles that babies play with, those things that never fall over no matter how hard you push them over. They just pop right back up.

Mom said: Lin's dead. I immediately wanted to laugh. Eighteen-year-old dudes don't die. Even if they are unemployed. But I knew

it wasn't a joke. My mom doesn't have a sense of humor, especially not one that twisted. She was staring at me and I didn't know what to think, I didn't know what to say. I knew she wanted me to cry or something. I wanted an emotion to overwhelm me. She reached out and squeezed my shoulder, so I said: He's going to miss that concert tonight.

It's getting dark now. My dad got home about an hour ago and I could hear them whispering outside my door. Dad wanted to come in and talk to me but Mom said I should be alone. Then I heard them tiptoe away.

The concert starts in a half hour. I wonder if Marcy knows Lin is dead. Maybe she kept calling his phone until his mom finally answered. That's when I realize that I want to call everyone. I want to be the first person that lets people know, I think they should hear it from me, but my fucking cell phone is in Lin's closet.

I hear a slight tap on my door and Mom asks if I want dinner. I say: No thank you. I think I'm going to go out for a walk.

She says: OK, sweetie. We love you very much.

My shoes are already on, but I wait until I know she's gone before I walk out of my room. I don't want her to give me that syrup voice she used when Grandma was in the hospital. They're sitting on the couch and Mom's head is on Dad's shoulder and he rubs his hand through her short brown hair while they watch TV. Their dinner plates are on the coffee table and the sickeningly sweet smell of teriyaki wiggles its way across the room. Lin loved Mom's teriyaki pork chops but I could never get over the smell, like the lobby of a dentist. I can tell Mom wants to look over at me — her neck muscles tighten. But there's no way I'm going to sit between them so they can put their arms around me and tell me everything is going to be OK. That's what Mom wants, not me.

I open the front door quietly and slip outside.

I should have grabbed my sweatshirt but there's no way I'm going back in. I can hear the electric hum of the highway a block over. On a whim I pull my old bicycle out of the shed — I remember how bad

Lin and I wanted to get these mountain bikes when we turned twelve. A year later they built houses where all of our trails had been.

I decide to ride by the old baseball fields. The pedals feel stiff, the wheels a little flat. I break into a sweat when I'm only like one block away from my house. After I pass under the highway, I don't see too many cars. The streetlights are spaced further apart than in my neighborhood. I can see the lights from the field blocks away. When I finally roll up, a Little League game is just ending. A couple of kids are bagging up the bats and I can see the coach talking to some parents. The smell of burning charcoal fills my lungs along with the smell of over-ripened fruit. As if someone was barbecuing Hubba Bubba.

I don't even slow down as I pass. I pedal faster, trying not to think of where I'm going next. But a moment later, I find myself pulled up along the curb in front of Lin's house.

That fucker can't possibly be dead.

The light is on in the dining room. The curtains are still open. I drop my bike and cut across the yard. And I see his mom sitting there, wearing her flower print nightgown. The table is empty and she's just sitting there, her arms dangling at her sides, like her body was left there while the rest of her went off to do something else. I feel like I haven't seen her in years even though I saw her yesterday afternoon. For the first time I'm noticing the streak of gray in her hair, and how the top part of her arms hang down over her elbows. I stand in the yard and watch her until I can feel the hair standing up on my arms. I think I should go home. And that's when she looks up. And looks right at me.

I turn quickly and head to my bike. I pick it up just as she opens the door. She doesn't say a word. I jump onto the bike and start pedaling away, but I can feel her eyes on my back. My legs slowly stop pumping. I do a wide turn in the middle of the street and bounce up over the curb leading into the driveway. She opens the door wider and steps back inside.

The house is really quiet when I walk in. It looks exactly how it did yesterday. But it's not the same. I poke my head into the dining room and don't see Lin's mom. The floor creaks upstairs. My throat dries up as I take the first few steps of the stairs. I skip the fifth stair, just like Lin and I always did when we were sneaking out after curfew to buy slurpees and candy so we could stay up all night. When I reach the top, I see the light on in Lin's room.

I want to walk in and see him in there. I want to see him sitting at his desk. Or playing his Xbox. I poke my head into the room and see his mom sitting in the same exact spot where I last saw Lin. They have the same nose. She doesn't say anything so I walk in. She doesn't look up. I cross over to his desk and sit in his beat-up chair. All his scraps of paper are still there. His lists of CDs he wanted to get. His scrawled directions to parties. Printouts of cheats for his video games. I can hear the computer humming. He never shut the damn thing off.

We're both sitting there. Like we're waiting for Lin to show up.

Every once in a while she takes a deep breath. But I don't see any tears. I get up to sit next to her on the bed, maybe put my arm around her, but I chicken out and open his closet instead. I immediately see my phone on the top shelf. Instead of grabbing it, I pick up the mitt again.

When she talks, it scares the shit out of me. My heart stops beating for what feels like a whole minute. She says: He hated playing baseball.

I say: So did I.

Then she smiles. But not like she's happy. She says: You know what his dad said before he died? He said 'You can run but you can't hide.' I always thought Franklin would run longer than me.

It was weird to hear his full name.

Then she says: He hated his nickname too.

I don't say anything. I get the feeling she just wants to talk. I slip the mitt onto my hand.

And she continues: He was lazy and ungrateful. He was inconsiderate. He did terrible in school. He quit everything he

started. He didn't listen to anything I said. He couldn't keep a job. He had no aspirations. But I loved him anyway. That little shit.

I want to tell her how funny Lin was but I don't think it matters. The mitt feels cold and dry. I want her to tell me what to do next. I want her to tell me what "aspirations" means. I want her to tell me I'm going to see Lin again.

She says: You should come by for dinner some time.

I should tell her I will. But I know it's not true.

With the mitt still on, I finally sit down on the bed beside her. Then the craziest thing happens. She puts her arm around me. And my eyeballs burn. My face freezes. I try to fight back the tears. I open my eyes really wide to dry out the edges. I tilt my head back slightly. I feel Lin's mom's thick arm across my shoulders. From inside Lin's closet, I hear my cell phone ring. But I'm not ready to get up.

