

Long Night, Hard Night

by Tyler Koch

It had been a long night, a hard night. The sky had been filled with blackened clouds, patters of wind snapping and whipping like a pirate's flag hung at full mast. Rain beat down from those blackened clouds, great globs of it, buckets of it, enough to flood the earth with its fury. Lightning struck, cracked, retreated, the momentary bursts of light illuminating only the blackness, as though the land wished to stay hidden. Thunder rolled and kept cadence.

The next morning the first rays of sunlight timidly lit a small patch of land, an open field touching the edges of a cemetery. The blackened clouds hovered. From the ground the sky looked like a giant bruise, mottled and misshapen. A man and a woman stood in that small patch of land. Their shoulders touched, their feet but inches apart. The wind took the woman's long hair and brushed it against the man's back.

"That was a long night," said the woman. Her eyes stared ahead, unfocused.

"A hard night." The man took a deep breath and shifted the urn from one hand to the other.

"Is this the spot?"

The man nodded and took another deep breath.

"Not in the cemetery, but outside it?"

"The cemetery didn't exist thirty years ago. It used to be a baseball field, a practice field that the local kids could come and play at. We used it over the summer a lot." He pointed to a patch of grass higher than the rest. "That was the pitcher's mound. The rest of it is gone now."

The woman shifted her eyes and nodded. "Did your brothers come here too?"

"We all did—" The man stopped short and squinted his eyes. "Not my mom. She was the only one."

The woman nodded and looked at the man for a moment. Thin lines of worry creased her forehead, but she said nothing and looked away.

"I wish they were here," she said.

"Who?"

"Your brothers."

The man opened his mouth to speak, closed it again. He nodded.

"Did you ask them again?"

"You know I did," said the man.

The urn was a simple piece of art, black save for ornamental flowers that adorned the exterior, colored mostly white and yellow. The handles were too small to properly hold the container unless it was held by a child, and the exterior showed signs of wear. Chips, fleck of paint missing. It was altogether an unusual urn but the man didn't seem to notice, or if he did, he didn't care. He shifted it back to his original hand and took another deep breath.

"I never imagined coming back to this place," he said.

"It's been years. Nearly thirty years since I was here. I can still remember—" he pointed "—I used to play first base, which was right there. Billy played catcher. Timmy was pitcher. The other kids hated that, they hated having to bat against Timmy. My dad loved it though. He would yell at them, make fun of them for striking out, for swinging and missing. They all hated him for laughing. Timmy did too. But dad did it anyway." The man's eyes lost their focus. "Those were the only times I remember him being happy, when he stood there and heckled the rest of the kids. He would have this huge smile on his face and he would close his eyes and laugh. Always like that. Always closed his eyes when he laughed."

The creases of worry reappeared on the woman's face. The wind tossed her hair back and forth across her face, but the clouds above maintained their bruised complexion. She glanced quickly at the urn, then to the field.

"Why here?" she asked.

The man took a deep breath. "I think that's why Billy and Timmy didn't want to come. They didn't understand. They thought this was his final way of punishing them, taking our spot away from us. We felt safe here, outside the house. It was the only place our dad would let us go, no questions asked. We could come here and be ourselves, let out all that air we'd been holding inside us. We could laugh and joke and not be afraid of being punished. Even when my dad came he was different. He was happy. We knew he couldn't touch us here."

"Do you think he's punishing you?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I stopped caring about what my dad wanted a long time ago. We all did."

"I still don't think you should have to be the one to do this. Your brothers should have come."

The man didn't reply.

"There was this one time that Timmy struck out a friend of ours. Penny. His last name was Penny." The man paused a moment. "We didn't have a lot of rules really, just show up when you could, take your turn to bat after everybody else. Timmy did most of the pitching and Billy the catching but otherwise it was pretty much a free for all. We liked it that way. We got upset when other kids tried to come and join, we'd send them away. If my dad was there he'd yell the loudest of all . . ."

The wrinkles on the man's face smoothed, his eyes staring but not seeing, fixed but unfocused.

"What about Penny?"

"What?"

The woman thrust her hands beneath her armpits.

"You said something about your brother striking out Penny."

"Oh." The man nodded absently, shifting the urn to his other hand. "Timmy threw a pitch right down the middle of the plate, dared Penny to swing and hit it. There used to be houses behind us." The man smiled. "We used to brag that we could hit

those houses but nobody ever did. They were too far away. But Penny said if Timmy threw the ball right down the middle that he would hit the houses. So Timmy did, two strikes and put the ball right down the middle. Penny swung so hard he lost his grip on the bat and fell flat on his butt." The man's smile bloomed. "We all laughed. Even Penny. He couldn't help himself. Timmy walked over and helped him up and patted him on the back but it was the funniest thing I think any of us had ever seen. I can still picture his face."

"Do you still keep in touch with him?"

The man shook his head, and his smile withered. "I don't keep in touch with any of them. After they heard about what my dad did they stayed away from us."

"Do you miss them?"

"Penny?"

The woman shrugged. "Them. The boys you used to play with."

The man considered this a moment. "I hadn't thought about it until I came here today. I don't know." He paused. "I'm not sure I'd know who they are anymore."

"You'd remember," said the woman. She pulled away a rebellious strand of hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear. "Of course you would."

The man and woman said nothing for the space of minutes. Their eyes ran across the cemetery, the road that ran through it, snaking like an abandoned piece of string. To trees behind, planted close together so that when they grew their leaves and branches tangled together. The sky refused to break, showing that ugly bruise, a color the man knew without having to look. His grip tightened on the urn, then released. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a picture, holding it with his free hand. The woman's eyes narrowed.

"That's the first picture I've ever seen of your father."

The man nodded. "That's why I brought it. I figured this is the last time we'll ever need to talk about him."

The woman reached out. "Can I?"
She inspected the picture as the man looked straight ahead.

"You look so young. How old were you?"

"Eight or nine. That's the last family photo we ever took. Mom passed a few years after that."

"Your mom looks different than I remember."

"She looks older." The man inhaled, held it, breathed out. "That was after we knew what was going on. All the other pictures I have were from when she was younger, before that."

"Timmy looks almost the same."

The man nodded. "Billy says the same thing."

"He looks like your father."

The man nodded but said nothing. The woman bit her lip and handed the picture back.

"Why did you bring the picture?" she asked.

"I'm going to leave it here with these ashes. I don't want it anymore."

"I didn't know you had it," said the woman.

"It's the first time I've looked at it in nearly twenty years. It's the only picture of him I have."

The woman said nothing. She reached out and put her hand on the man's shoulder, rubbing her thumb back and forth.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"It's not your fault."

"I know that. But you carry it with you. I wish there was something I could do to help. Some way I could . . . I don't know. Some way I could erase the past."

The man's lips formed the ghost of a smile. "It's alright. Here." He handed the picture to the woman and took a step back. In a fluid motion the urn left the man's hand and soared in the air, turning end on end. The top fell off, hitting the ground first. The urn hit a protruding rock and split in several pieces, the grey ash spilling through the cracks like sand through open fingers. Fragments of

picture followed, taken by the wind and scattered across the grass. Fractured segments of a former life.

The man and the woman stood hand in hand, unspeaking.

Puddles of sunlight began to collect on the open field, in the cemetery, between the branches and leaves in the distance. Inspired by the boldness, birds took to the air, white clouds moving in from far off, threatening to overtake the bruised clouds above. The man waited to move until the shreds of picture disappeared completely from his view.

"You ready?" asked the man.

"Ready," replied the woman.

They turned and made the walk back to their car. The man opened the door and inserted the keys into the ignition. The woman paused a moment and looked back. It was only a glance, no more than a peek. She saw the broken remains of the urn, the strange way the wind refused to carry the ashes as it had done with the picture. She got into the car and buckled her seatbelt.

"I'm going to have to call Billy and Timmy tonight," said the man without looking her direction. His hands rested on the steering wheel. "They're going to want to know, even if they say they don't. It's going to be a long night."

"It will," agreed the woman. "A hard night."

She took the man's hand off the steering wheel and kissed his palm.

"Let's get back home," she said.

The man nodded in agreement.

The black car pulled from the side of the road and drove into the distance, growing smaller and smaller until it disappeared at the point where the road meets the sky.

