

Where these Dreams Go

By Kyle Ward

ENG 218

September still burned in Arizona. While the rest of the country seemed to settle into school colored windbreakers and team logo blankets, to me it still felt like I could fry any second under that two-a-days' sun. School had started for me and my teammates like a mere formality, rather than the pomp and circumstance most Seniors have on their "Last First day of School;" for us it was just six lackadaisical periods before the most beautiful three hours from hell. The buzz around the halls oozed with excitement for the real start of the school year: South Davis vs. Glenwood Heights on the first Friday in September.

As was tradition, after Thursday walkthroughs, we would have team dinner at Coach Stacy's house. And, as was tradition, I would come home and immediately crash on my bed, instead of hitting up the pep rally or driving out to the pregame Bonfire just past the city limits.

It was exhausting. 7 hours of classes, 3 hours of practice, 2 more hours fighting with my girlfriend, Becca, on the phone about where we were going after the game, who are we going to hang out with, what about our plans for Homecoming, which is almost 2 months away just FYI, blah blah blah. I just wanted to listen to some records and wind down.

But I hear footsteps echo down the hallway, as the hardwood squeaks under socked feet. The shadow of my mother looms through the crack under my door. I can almost taste her uneasiness, like she wants to knock, to come in and sit at the foot of my bed and talk to me like I'm seven years old without a care in the world. Then I hear a voice, masculine and calm, come from down the hall.

"Honey, don't bother him. He's got lots on his mind, and a big game tomorrow. He just needs some rest. It's exhausting being in high school nowadays. Come on..."

I heard my parents in hushed discussion, my mom wanting to find out “what’s wrong,” my dad telling her to let it be, even if just for tonight. Their sense of worry is not lost on me, but their reasoning is.

“It’s just a phase, he’s just stressed, he’s got a lot going on,” he said.

“But he’s been this way for so long. Do you think it’s...”

Ugh, I’m so tired. I wonder if you can ask for a medically induced coma if you’re perfectly healthy, but you’re just super tired. A couple weeks should be perfect. Maybe I can just sleep through my whole senior year, and just wake up in time to go to USC.

A rapping on the window snapped me out of my “meditative” state. A red haired girl was tapping her pale fingers across the pane. She had gotten bored waiting for my attention, so now it looked like she was trying to play Vivaldi or Beethoven or some other weird dude in a wig on my window. I rolled over and motioned her to come in. She lifted the window up and crawled through.

“Are you for real right now?” I groaned. “When was the last time you knocked on my window? It’s not like I ever lock it...”

“You really should consider it, what if I was a burglar and you were actually asleep?” She asked, mockingly. “I could take all your track medals and your six string and your collection of rare...toxically masculine Barbie dolls and be half way to Canada by now.”

“But why not Mexico? That’s the question, it’s like right there dude...”

“Uh, yeah!” She mocked, “That’s exactly where they’d *think* I’d go. Besides, with these bright red locks, I wouldn’t last two days. And there’s no way I could pull off those Chola brows...”

I chuckled, “To be honest, neither can they.”

Claire is my neighbor. Not my next-door neighbor—she lived right behind me, actually; my room looked right into her bedroom. We shared a giant tree that we used to climb, almost like a bridge between her roof and mine. She and I would go back and forth between our rooms. I don’t think I even know what color her front door is. We thought we were sneaky, and it added to the mystique of our friendship. We often laughed about our teen movie cliché of a friendship. As long as we didn’t fall in love, we were good.

The quiet argument raged on just outside my door. My parents were trying to stay inconspicuous and failing miserably. I looked back over at Claire—I had lost her in thought. She was staring out the window back towards her house. I could see memories of her father wisping away in the emerald of her eyes.

“You still miss him?” I asked, trying to be of comfort. But it was no use. She just stood there, blank stare out the window. She said nothing. She *never* said nothing. Soon she snapped out of it and became vastly more intrigued by the hushed argument outside my door than thinking about her father.

“What’s going on? What’re they talking about?” Claire crept closer to the door, as if she were getting ready to sink her teeth into some juicy, medium rare gossip. “Please tell me it’s about your sister.” Her eyebrows bounced with enthusiasm as a smile enveloped her mischievous face. “I always hoped there was something wrong with the Scholastic Barbie doll. My bet was

that she was going to get hooked on Adderall and then she would snap right after homecoming and she would spend the rest of your guys' senior year in rehab." She closed her eyes and inhaled, as she put her ear to the door.

"No, Claire" I pleaded, pulling her away from the door, "They're not talking about Maya, their talking about me..."

"You?" She puzzled, "Why you, what's going on?"

"They just think I don't socialize enough. That I spend too much time cooped up in here, and that I'm, like, struggling with something..."

She sat down on my bed, put her feet up flat and hugged my pillow.

"Are you struggling with something, Gray?"

"Yeah, with getting enough sleep." I tried to show some levity to deflect her unwarranted suspicion. "Man, I swear I get like 10 hours a night and it's still not enough" I said.

Claire still didn't seemed convinced, almost like something was off. "What's goin' on Gray?"

I sighed, annoyed. "I'm just kinda swamped. I got school, I got ball, I got schools trying to get me to verbal, I got Becca being Becca. Do you know what she's doing right now? She is making campaign posters to get people to vote for us for Homecoming Court. Homecoming isn't 'till like Halloween! It's almost like she's dating the " I rambled, picking up steam. "And now my parents are worried about me because I don't go to enough parties? Look, if I wanted to listen to Drake and Brodie make dick jokes and drunkenly hit on every girl they see, I'd've taken remedial Algebra. And man, I'd never thought I'd be grateful for calculus."

Aside from a brief snort of laughter, my ramblings still didn't have Claire on my side; her right eyebrow was close enough to make a missile strike on her hairline. She stared at me, like we were seventh graders trying to get each other to admit who we had a crush on. Finally, she relented "Whatever you say. You wanna work yourself to the bone tryin' to get an offer from your dream school, be my guest, because I don't have to worry about it." She blew me a raspberry.

"Funny you should mention that." I said. Now *I* had a juicy secret. "Guess who I got an offer from..."

"USC?" She asked. It was like she was a champagne bottle ready to explode.

I held up the envelope with the Crimson and Gold seal in the corner. "Full ride."

"NO WAY GRAYSON! THIS IS AMAZING!!!!" She was more excited than I was. She hugged me and jumped around as if we were in the clubhouse after winning the Series. I half expected confetti to fall from the ceiling. I just smiled faintly as I watched her celebrate. "When did you find out?" She asked.

"Last week. Mom wanted to wait 'till I saw what Stanford offered, but I couldn't pass it up so I verballed. I wasn't getting into Stanford anyway. Besides, their receiving core is set for the next three years. I'd be lucky to see the field my Junior year. But SC says if I work hard, redshirt a year, I'd start as a freshman."

"This is crazy! And now you have GH tomorrow night. You better beat the brakes off them. I freaking hate those guys."

"Me too. And we will."

The corkboard above my desk didn't really get that much attention these days. My mom had bought it for me to put above my desk, so I could pin some motivational quotes or whatever to it so I could look at it when homework got too hard or whatever. She thought if a problem got too tough, I'd have some quirky little "You can do it" or something and my grades would magically get better. Instead I put normal stuff on there. Ribbons from junior high track, pictures from football camp, newspaper clipping from the Centennial game last year (seven grabs for 165 and 2 scores), ticket stubs from Arizona/USC a couple years ago, and a photo booth strip of me and Becca at the fair this summer. But the thing that monopolized my stare was a profile of me from a recruiting website.

Grayson McVey

WR 6'2"/195 lbs.

South Davis High, Davis, AZ

4 Stars

Grayson McVey, one of the top WR recruits in the 2018 class for the South Davis Bobcats led the state last year with 82 grabs for 1853 yards and 14 touchdowns. He led his team to the Arizona State championship game, earning Conference Player of the Year and finishing runner-up for Gatorade Player of the year in Arizona. McVey has prototype size, speed and ball skills to excel at the next level. An exceptional route runner, he can get open against even the best defensive backs in the State. There are questions about his run blocking ability, coming from a Run and Shoot type

offense, but his play making ability has gotten him offers from most of the Pac-12 as well as some other Big 10 and ACC schools.

Dad had pinned that up last week before the GH game as a surprise. It was the first site that said I was a four-star recruit. It was a big deal. *Was*. I leaned forward on my crutches, grabbed my book, and limped back to my bed.

The sun was on its way to bed, painting watercolor streaks of pink and orange on top of an azure canvas. I had my left leg laid out straight on my bed. As if it had a choice, being stuck in a knee brace and all.

My window slides open, squealing like the virgin in a horror movie, because, well, it's old. I would have jumped, had I not heard that sound four thousand times before. Claire.

"Wow, you look awful." She said.

"Thanks," I smirked. "You look pretty good yourself."

"Thought you'd be coming home today. So I decided you could use some cheering up." She sat on the bed, almost right on my knee. I cringed on reflex. "Oh shoot! Sorry!" She jumped up, nearly hysteric in her apologies. I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing at her.

"It's ok. Just be careful." She sat back down, more gingerly this time.

"So how bad is it?" This was a new face for her, genuine concern. I hadn't seen it before. Her eyes looked almost sad, but still, they glistened, just like they always had. The sunset hit her crimson hair; now it looked almost gold. Her freckles seemed deliberate now. Almost as if God himself painted every single one by hand. Perfectly imperfect, the only true kind of perfection.

“Umm...” Back to reality. “Doc said it’s a torn ACL. I’ll need surgery, and I’m definitely done for the season.”

Claire bit her lip. “What does it mean for USC?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

We had the blanket spread across the roof just outside my bedroom window. It really doesn’t get too cold in Davis, so watching fireworks outside on New Year’s was a thing. Claire had taken to the Easy Cheese and Triscuits I had brought out. I climbed out onto the roof, holding a couple glasses and my parent’s ‘96 Chianti.

“Hey, Hey! Look who brought the goods!” She sat up, “Oh man, you are dead if they find out.”

I shrugged it off. “Nah, We’re good. Parents are at a cabin in Vail for the week, and they’re not going to miss this one anyway. They bought a case last year, took two sips each, and swore off the stuff. They’re scotch people now. Besides, they’ve always been ‘If you’re gonna drink, do it in the house’ parents anyway. I think they’re secretly hoping that If they leave me unsupervised long enough I might get out of the house and do something stupid, like go to Vegas or vandalize a cop car or do literally anything with Drake and Brodie. Just as long as I’m not by myself.”

I poured her a glass, then myself.

“Cheers” She giggled.

“Cheers.”

We clinked and drained our glasses. “Ugh, it just tastes like grape juice with like 20 proof vodka. Do they even make vodka that proof?”

She laughed at my face. Then her face twisted into a confused look.

“Hey, where’s Becca, why aren’t you spending New Year’s with her? Are you guys off again?” she asked.

“Oh,” I shook my head while taking another sip. “I convinced her to take Maya to a party downtown. I just... don’t really want to deal with her tonight, you know? She’s so concerned about our image all the time. It’s too much. With any luck, she’ll hook up with some guy and that’ll be just one less thing to worry about, and she’ll be gone for good!” I faked a maniacal laugh.

Claire smacked me in the face.

“Hey! I’m kidding! My goodness!”

She crossed her arms. She looked pissed. She’d never been mad at me before. Do I start begging for forgiveness? Do I grovel? I’ve never groveled before...

As she shook her head, a sly grin broke across her face.

“I know.” She smirked “So am I.”

“You are the devil. That’s why they say Gingers have no souls.”

We traded jokes and poured more wine. At some point we just ended up looking up at the stars.

“Have you thought about what you’re gonna do yet?” She asked me.

“Honestly, I have no idea.” I rotated my head to look at her. She brought her eyes in line with mine. They looked like they had stolen those stars from the sky so they could wear them like some expensive necklace. “I mean, ever since I got hurt, every Power 5 offer has pulled out. My scouting report says I’m injury prone, every scout I’ve talked to says there’s no guarantee I’ll be the same player, and I’m not worth the risk of a scholarship on a Pac 12 roster. So right now I just have offers from NAU, Montana and Boise State.”

“Boise State, aren’t they like a Top 20 school? And don’t they play on a Blue field? That could be so cool dude.” Claire was the master of finding the silver lining, even if it was covered in blue field turf.

“I don’t want to play on a blue field.” I turned back to look at the sky. “I want to play at the LA Coliseum, in the Rose Bowl, Autzen Stadium. On grass—beautiful, natural, *green* grass. I want to be Trojan. It’s been my dream since before I could even catch. It’s all I’ve ever wanted.” I paused and turned back to Claire. She hadn’t taken her eyes away from me. That look I had only seen once before was back. “It’s all I am.”

She bit her lip, “Didn’t they say you could walk on? At least try out? He said they wouldn’t be getting a lot of guys to come out this year, maybe you’ll have a good shot.”

“It’s so hard to walk on. Unless you’re a preferred walk on, you have like a one in one hundred chance of even making the spring ball roster. Then they have even more cuts before fall camp.”

Her eyes finally returned to the sky. We laid there in silence for a minute.

“It’s been a year. Do you miss your dad?” I finally asked.

She sat there stoically. I had just hit a nerve. She just furrowed her brow. The silence grew deafening.

Then I remembered a picture I kept in my wallet.

“Hey, you remember that time we went to Disneyland on that football/cross country trip back freshman year?”

“Yeah, the one where everyone made fun of me because they thought I had a crush on you? All because we went on Splash Mountain together that one time? And as I recall, you had your first kiss that trip too didn’t you? With that ticket taker girl, right?”

I laughed. I had forgotten all about that. “Oh gosh, that was *that* trip, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. It was quite the trip.” Claire was salty all of a sudden. “What about it?”

I opened my wallet and pulled out a little three-by-four picture and showed it to her.

There was a boy had short brown hair, braces and in desperate need of a growth-spurt, and a skinny, freckle-faced auburn-haired girl, both about 14, screaming their heads off as they sat in a giant cartoon log screaming down a flume of water.

“Oh my gosh, you have this?” She was floored. Well, as floored as you can be on the roof. “How? Why?”

“I’m not telling. All I’m going to say is that it was one of the best trips of my life.” I said.

I had never seen a smile like the one that graced that face. That perfectly imperfect face. It wasn’t giant, wasn’t beaming, it was quiet. Like finding out that the most important moment in

your life was kept safe and sacred, guarded from revisionist history or hearsay recollections. A perfect moment in time preserved forever for two kids on a roof, drinking stolen wine, and ringing in 2018.

“What do you think about falling in love?” I asked Claire.

She was plucking on my six string, leaned back in my beanbag chair; I was sprawled on my bed flicking a basketball up towards the ceiling. We had been talking for hours now.

“Um, I approve?” She chuckled her recommendation. “Ten out of ten, would definitely recommend,” she shrugged.

I cocked my eyebrow, and laughingly shook my head. “No, like, why is it so hard?”

“Oh man, you and old Beckers broke up again huh?” She had that half mock in her voice that only your friends can have. That whole *“I feel your pain, but saw it coming,”* voice with a little *“I told you so”* sprinkled on top. Classic Claire. “What happened?”

“We had another fight.” I rolled my eyes. We had been on-again-off-again for about a year now. “She’s just stressed about the future you know? She wants to make sure she can go somewhere in California so she can be ‘near’ me.”

“Like you’d be so far away now?” Sarcasm was Claire’s involuntary reflex when it came to Becks.

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t get what she’s worried about. She’s got the grades, she’s plenty smart. Besides, ASU wants her to cheer and NAU says she can do the Hep on scholarship if she

gets in shape to run this season. I don't know why she wants to go to a UC school and pay thirty grand a year just to be near me."

"You kidding? You're her meal ticket! Why be strong and independent when you find your sugar daddy in high school?"

Annoyance grew in laughter's place. "She's her own meal ticket, she's crazy talented. Besides, why would she want to be around some fourth-stringer who won't see even a special teams snap until his sophomore year?"

"First of all, you'll redshirt a year and be starting as a freshman, just like coach said. I'd put money on it. And second of all, are you trying to get rid of her? You sound like you don't even want her around after graduation..."

A chuckle crept through my nose.

"I mean she's gorgeous, she's athletic, she's smart. Why would you not want her around?" She kept pestering me. "

"I *do* want her around," I reiterated. I didn't know if it was true, though. "I just don't want to feel like I'm holding her back."

"You mean you don't want her holding you back."

I hated to admit it, but she was right. I knew I needed a change. I knew I couldn't keep her on my hook forever. But I needed Becca, didn't I? I didn't really have anyone else...

"So what are you gonna do, Grayson?"

Sometimes, levity is a good thing. "The usual. Give her a day, maybe two and play Hey There Delilah outside her window."

“Ugh.” She sighed, almost disgusted “Why are girls so dull? That song’s not even good!”

“You never answered my question.” She rolled her eyes. “Why is it so hard to fall in love? I want to be in love with her, she just makes it hard sometimes you know? Why is it so hard?”

The thought stuck on her face, like I could almost read it in her freckles. The silence became thick but warm, like an Arizona night. For once I was comfortable with the void.

“...I don’t think it is.” She started.

This was unbelievable. “What do you mean? It’s like the hardest thing in the world...”

“I don’t think it’s hard. I don’t think it’s hard at all. At least it shouldn’t be.” Her voice was different now, almost melancholic. “Think about it, you’re *falling* in love. Falling is one of the easiest things in the world. It’s just gravity. I can push you and you’d fall. You can jump off a cliff, and you’re falling. You don’t need to do anything when you’re falling. You can’t. And it’s scary and exhilarating and hopeless and there’s nothing you can do about it. And then you hit that wall and it’s... and it breaks you, shatters you even. And you hope you never fall again, but it’s the only thing that comes naturally. And sometimes it happens by accident, sometimes you step off into the darkness, sometimes you jump headfirst. But the falling, it’s the easiest thing in the world.”

Something wasn’t sitting well inside of me. “I don’t know.” I shook my head. I didn’t know what I was thinking. I didn’t know if I could think at all. All I knew was every muscle in my soul was clenched, like my heart was entangled, grappling with my head, while my body laid limp on my bed. I never broke eye contact with the shadows of my ceiling fan.

“What don’t you know?” She asked. I had no idea.

“I...” Words were struggling, “...Shouldn’t it make sense, though?”

She shrugged, lifted herself off the bean bag, and sauntered toward the bookcase. “I don’t know. I mean for some people, they might be destined to be Prom King, and they find someone who’s ambition is to be Prom queen, and it makes sense, and they make it work. And others may fall for someone who makes no sense on paper, they might have completely different ambitions or even views on life.” She flipped through my album collection on the shelf. “But they’re the ones who want to listen to The Goo Goo Dolls on vinyl with you, and who splits their Mushu pork with you and who wants to spend Sundays watching *Singing in the Rain* and *Casablanca* with you. And it just...works.” She spun the album cover in her hand. *Dizzy Up the Girl*.

“That’s their best album right there.” I tried to hide a smile. I knew what she was doing.

She responded by putting the record on and putting the needle on track ten. My eyes drifted shut as I sang along to the words:

And I wonder where these dreams go

When the world gets in your way...

I opened my eyes, felt the breeze through the open window. And I was alone again.

It had been months since I tore my ACL, and here I sat. My mom had received a call from the Wide Receivers coach at Boise State. My last D1 offer. He said that because he hadn’t heard from me, they signed two other receivers and weren’t looking for another receiver in this

class. My mom was sitting outside my room in the hallway. I sat on the ground on the other side of the wall. My door was shut, but I could still hear her sobs. My dad did his best to console her, like he's had months of practice.

I heard a tap on my window. Claire. I couldn't even lift my head. I was still in shock. No tears, no frown, no emotion. Just shock. How could this have happened?

I heard the window slide open. Then I heard it close. She had made her way over to my side. She let her back slide down the wall until she hit the floor. Her hair was pulled back, her sweatshirt sleeves covered the palms of her hands. She laid her temple on my shoulder. I could feel the heat from her head through my hoodie; she was crying.

She sniffed. "It's gonna be ok."

Emotions overwhelmed my eyes. I hadn't cried since I was fourteen. I hadn't felt *anything* in a year. But here it was.

"No. It's not."

She looked up at me with those eyes. I couldn't lie to her. I couldn't.

"I have to walk on. I have to try."

I might as well have stabbed her in the gut. It hurt to look at her because she seemed so hurt.

"Why?" Claire asked.

"It's all I have."

“No it’s not. You are talented, and smart, and you have an amazing family. You have Becca, and you have the world opened up to you. You can do whatever you want. Please, don’t do this. We can’t see you go through all of this all over again.”

I pulled away from her.

“Please, Grayson, don’t do this. Look at how you’ve been for the last year. You’ve barely existed, all because you lost...”

Her tears choked out her words.

“Grayson. Think of your mom. What if you don’t make the team and you spiral out of control. She could lose you. Don’t do this to her!”

I stood up. I had lost it.

“Like you care!” I screamed. “Where have you been this last year? You have no idea what I’m going through. I’ve lost *everything*! I’ve lost who I am. I have nothing anymore. Nothing but this sliver of hope that I can somehow, someday make this dream happen. Its all I have.”

Claire was silent. She just shook her head as she looked at me in shock. It felt like hours passed before she started again.

“Gray,” she pleaded softly. Her words were still choked by her tears, “You don’t know what I wouldn’t give to spend five minutes with my dad again. There’s so much I wish I could say, but I can’t. Maybe one day I will, but I can’t. And if you don’t think that hurts more than anything else in the world, then you really can’t feel anything anymore, can you?”

It was getting late in the evening, around 7:30 or so, the February sun having just crawled under the blanket of the navy sky. I laid in my bed, waiting for that window to slide open and arouse my parents suspicion, but the gnawing feeling in my gut said it wasn't coming. That she wasn't coming. I look across to her window, thank goodness her light is on. I need to talk to her now. The honesty in my heart is plaguing me, almost like a parasite, eating away at all my happiness. I have to get rid of it. I have to tell someone. I have to tell her.

I slip on my shoes and zip up my hoodie. I slide the window open; the breeze is clean, the kind of intoxicating warmth that is only found in love and summer. As I climb over to her rooftop, I hear something coming from her bedroom. I can barely make out her father retrieving the ukulele off the ground that he must have dropped while dusting her room. His stare is wistful, his eyes full of the memories of his daughter. I can almost see them replaying in his smile and his tears.

I roll up her window.

“Oh, my goodness. It's you Gray. You about gave me a heart attack,” he said relieved. He wasn't exaggerating either.

“Sorry, Mr. Winters. Didn't mean to startle you.”

“Oh, no, that's quite alright.”

“Also, sorry for the window. “ I said.

“It's fine. It's not the first time; I'm sure, for you.” He paused. I felt briefly like a little kid getting caught sneaking ice cream after dinner. “Don't think that we didn't know.” A smile

broke briefly on his left cheek as memories of his daughter and I sneaking in and out of each other's houses filled his mind. "We figured if the worst we did was a daughter who was breaking and entering to see a boy she liked, we weren't the worst. At worst we were raising a stalker." His smile formed into a wistful laugh.

I started to look around her room. So much was the same. The same quilt on her bed that her mom had made for her 12th birthday. The yearbooks all stacked on her bedside table. Her corkboard above her desk, just like mine. I saw a picture I had seen before, one of a brown haired boy and a red haired girl on Splash Mountain. I smiled faintly as I remembered I had its brother in my wallet at that very moment. I had no idea she still had it too.

A little news clipping was pinned ever so delicately next to the picture. An obituary of one Caroline Winters and her Daughter, Claire. Killed in a car accident, December 28, 2016. A little over a year ago.

Mr. Winters gave me a knowing look, almost like he read through my soul.

"You loved her, didn't you?" He asked.

I nodded. I wanted to tell him, about the pain. About how I still saw her, talked to her, was still in denial that she was gone. About how she still climbed through my window, sat in my beanbag chair, laughed at my stupid jokes.

After the lump finally cleared my throat, I broke the tension.

"How did you do it sir?"

"Do what?" He furrowed his brow, but I knew he knew what I was asking.

"How did you get over losing your wife? The love of your life?"

He sighed, pulled the legs of his pants up an inch, and sat on the edge of her bed. He took a framed picture of their little family off her bed side table, and gently stroked the glass protecting his wife's face. I could see it in his eyes; he wished he could brush those fingers down her freckle-laced cheek just one more time.

"To be honest," he started, still taken by the photo. "I never have. Truly."

I sat down beside him.

I sat in silence, but my soul quietly plead with him to finish.

"But, I keep hoping for the best, because I know that's what she would want if she were here. Even when the world is darkest, I hope for the best. Because I have to."

I stared at the picture. A faint smile found my face. We sat in deafening silence for hours. Or maybe it was just minutes, till I finally broke the silence.

"It's weird, I remember it was a comeback route, third and long," I started. "I had lined up outside, they were playing two man, I think, I got past the sticks and turned, the ball was right on the money. I turned up field..." I paused, "and that safety that had cheated over, caught my collar from behind, and my legs got caught as he horse-collared me to the ground. I heard a pop, and that was it."

Mr. Winters' calloused hand found my shoulder. For the first time in a year, emotion coursed through my limbs. Pain, grief, sadness, fired every synapse on my skin and filled every vein in my body.

"The crazy thing is, I still don't even know if we won the game." I said through the burning tears. The pain felt like the first sunburn after winter—a reminder that I'm still alive.

“And now,” I went on, wiping my nose with my sleeve, “I don’t even know if I’ll play ball again, the scouts say it’s hard to say if I’ll ever be the same player again.”

The warmth of the light from the room glowed out across the cool sky. I looked across the yard. My room seemed bleak now, the iced greys a stark reality compared to the warmth of the Winters’ home. Mr. Winters didn’t say a word. Didn’t move a muscle. Just sat, as a young man cried mourning the loss of his two loves.

The closet was half-empty, most of the shelves had been cleared, save a few trophies and action figures-mementos from a childhood somewhat outgrown, even if only by age. The last box we had sat on my bed, open and unlabeled. I had been filing my records in this box, their player already in my little sedan. As I filled the box, one sleeve slowly reached out, and wouldn’t let go of my eye. I flipped it over, and read the track list. *Dizzy*, *Slide*, *Broadway* and *Iris* had been our favorites, but only one was circled. Track 10, *Acoustic #3*.

I chuckled as I packed it among the rest of the records. I taped it up, labeled it, and took it down to my car. It was pretty well packed already. “This is all of them.”

My guitar took up most of the back seat, along with my clothes. I put the last box, marked CW in the front seat.

Becca was already in LA for track tryouts. Crazy that they would tryout a spring sport in August. I had my tryouts in January, so I could be a regular student for a semester. I lost my redshirt year, and there was no guarantee that I’d be on the roster come next fall. But Becca and I were going to take on USC together.

I exchanged the pleasantries with my parents; I gave Maya a big bear hug, and assured her I'd call her every week. She was headed off to Columbia tomorrow.

Car all packed, I buckled myself in, as I started the car, I thought of one last thing. I took out my wallet, pulled out that old picture of that awkward boy and the red-haired girl and propped it up by the speedometer. I put the key in the ignition, and I was off.