THE ART *of* FIELDING

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Schwartz didn't notice the kid during the game. Or rather, he noticed only what everyone else did — that he was the smallest player on the field, a scrawny novelty of a shortstop, quick of foot but weak with the bat. Only after the game ended, when the kid returned to the sun-scorched diamond to take extra grounders, did Schwartz see the grace that shaped Henry's every move.

This was the second Sunday in August, just before Schwartz's sophomore year at Westish College, that little school in the crook of the baseball glove that is Wisconsin. He'd spent the summer in Chicago, his hometown, and his Legion team had just beaten a bunch of farmboys from South Dakota in the semifinals of a no-name tournament. The few dozen people in the stands clapped mildly as the last out was made. Schwartz, who'd been weak with heat cramps all day, tossed his catcher's mask aside and hazarded a few unsteady steps toward the dugout. Dizzy, he gave up and sank down to the dirt, let his huge aching back relax against the chain-link fence. It was technically evening, but the sun still beat down wickedly. He'd caught five games since Friday night, roasting like a beetle in his black catcher's gear.

His teammates slung their gloves into the dugout and headed for the concession stand. The championship game would begin in half an hour. Schwartz hated being the weak one, the one on the verge of passing out, but it couldn't be helped. He'd been pushing himself hard all

summer — lifting weights every morning, ten-hour shifts at the foundry, baseball every night. And then this hellish weather. He should have skipped the tournament — varsity football practice at Westish, an infinitely more important endeavor, started tomorrow at dawn, suicide sprints in shorts and pads. He should be napping right now, preserving his knees, but his teammates had begged him to stick around. Now he was stuck at this ramshackle ballpark between a junkyard and an adult bookstore on the interstate outside Peoria. If he were smart he'd skip the championship game, drive the five hours north to campus, check himself into Student Health for an IV and a little sleep. The thought of Westish soothed him. He closed his eyes and tried to summon his strength.

When he opened his eyes the South Dakota shortstop was jogging back onto the field. As the kid crossed the pitcher's mound he peeled off his uniform jersey and tossed it aside. He wore a sleeveless white undershirt, had an impossibly concave chest and a fierce farmer's burn. His arms were as big around as Schwartz's thumbs. He'd swapped his green Legion cap for a faded red St. Louis Cardinals one. Shaggy dust-blond curls poked out beneath. He looked fourteen, fifteen at most, though the tournament minimum was seventeen.

During the game, Schwartz had figured the kid was too small to hit high heat, so he'd called for one fastball after another, up and in. Before the last, he'd told the kid what was coming and added, "Since you can't hit it anyway." The kid swung and missed, gritted his teeth, turned to make the long walk back to the dugout. Just then Schwartz said — ever so softly, so that it would seem to come from inside the kid's own skull — "*Pussy.*" The kid paused, his scrawny shoulders tensed like a cat's, but he didn't turn around. Nobody ever did.

Now when the kid reached the worked-over dust that marked the shortstop's spot, he stopped, bouncing on his toes and jangling his limbs as if he needed to get loose. He bobbed and shimmied, windmilled his arms, burning off energy he shouldn't have had. He'd played as many games in this brutal heat as Schwartz.

Moments later the South Dakota coach strolled onto the field with a bat in one hand and a five-gallon paint bucket in the other. He set the bucket beside home plate and idly chopped at the air with the bat. Another of the South Dakota players trudged out to first base, carrying an identical bucket and yawning sullenly. The coach reached into his bucket, plucked out a ball, and showed it to the shortstop, who nodded and dropped into a shallow crouch, his hands poised just above the dirt.

The kid glided in front of the first grounder, accepted the ball into his glove with a lazy grace, pivoted, and threw to first. Though his motion was languid, the ball seemed to explode off his fingertips, to gather speed as it crossed the diamond. It smacked the pocket of the first baseman's glove with the sound of a gun going off. The coach hit another, a bit harder: same easy grace, same gunshot report. Schwartz, intrigued, sat up a little. The first baseman caught each throw at sternum height, never needing to move his glove, and dropped the balls into the plastic bucket at his feet.

The coach hit balls harder and farther afield — up the middle, deep in the hole. The kid tracked them down. Several times Schwartz felt sure he would need to slide or dive, or that the ball was flat-out unreachable, but he got to each one with a beat to spare. He didn't seem to move faster than any other decent shortstop would, and yet he arrived instantly, impeccably, as if he had some foreknowledge of where the ball was headed. Or as if time slowed down for him alone.

After each ball, he dropped back into his feline crouch, the fingertips of his small glove scraping the cooked earth. He barehanded a slow roller and fired to first on a dead run. He leaped high to snag a tailing line drive. Sweat poured down his cheeks as he sliced through the soup-thick air. Even at full speed his face looked bland, almost bored, like that of a virtuoso practicing scales. He weighed a buck and a quarter, maximum. Where the kid's thoughts were — whether he was having any thoughts at all, behind that blank look — Schwartz couldn't say. He remembered a line from Professor Eglantine's poetry class: *Expressionless, expresses God.*

Then the coach's bucket was empty and the first baseman's bucket full, and all three men left the field without a word. Schwartz felt bereft. He wanted the performance to continue. He wanted to rewind it and see it again in slow motion. He looked around to see who else had been watching — wanted at least the pleasure of exchanging a glance with another enraptured witness — but nobody was paying any attention. The few fans who hadn't gone in search of beer or shade gazed idly at their cell-phone screens. The kid's loser teammates were already in the parking lot, slamming their trunks.

Fifteen minutes to game time. Schwartz, still dizzy, hauled himself to his feet. He would need two quarts of Gatorade to get through the final game, then a coffee and a can of dip for the long midnight drive. But first he headed for the far dugout, where the kid was packing up his gear. He'd figure out what to say on the way over. All his life Schwartz had yearned to possess some single transcendent talent, some unique brilliance that the world would consent to call genius. Now that he'd seen that kind of talent up close, he couldn't let it walk away.

2

Henry Skrimshander stood in line beneath a billowing, navy-and-ecru-striped tent, waiting to obtain his room assignment. It was the last week of August, just three weeks after he'd met Mike Schwartz in Peoria. He'd been on the bus from Lankton all night, and the straps of his duffel bags formed a sweaty *X* across his chest. A smiling woman in a navy T-shirt with a man's bearded face on it asked him to spell his name. Henry did so, his heart thumping. Mike Schwartz had assured him that everything was taken care of, but each moment the smiling woman spent flipping through her printouts confirmed what Henry had secretly known all along, made only more apparent by the groomed green lawn and the gray stone buildings that surrounded it, the sun just risen over the steamy lake and the mirrored-glass facade of the library, the lithe tank-topped girl behind him tip-tapping on her iPhone as she sighed with a boredom so sophisticated that Henry could imagine precisely nothing about her life: he didn't belong here.

He'd been born in Lankton, South Dakota, seventeen and a half years earlier. It was a town of forty-three thousand people, surrounded by seas of corn. His father was a foreman at a metalworking shop. His mom worked part-time as an X-ray technician at All Saints. His little sister, Sophie, was a sophomore at Lankton High.

On Henry's ninth birthday, his dad had taken him to the sporting goods store and told him to pick out whatever he liked. There had never

been any doubt about the choice — there was only one glove in the store with the name of Aparicio Rodriguez inscribed in the pocket — but Henry took his time, trying on every glove, amazed by the sheer fact of being able to *choose*. The glove seemed huge back then; now it fit him snugly, barely bigger than his left hand. He liked it that way; it helped him feel the ball.

When he came home from Little League games, his mother would ask how many errors he'd made. "Zero!" he'd crow, popping the pocket of his beloved glove with a balled-up fist. His mom still used the name — "Henry, put Zero away, please!" — and he winced, embarrassed, when she did. But in the safety of his mind he never thought of it any other way. Nor did he let anyone else touch Zero. If Henry happened to be on base when an inning ended, his teammates knew better than to ferry his hat and glove onto the diamond for him. "The glove is not an object in the usual sense," said Aparicio in *The Art of Fielding*. "For the infielder to divide it from himself, even in thought, is one of the roots of error."

Henry played shortstop, only and ever shortstop — the most demanding spot on the diamond. More ground balls were hit to the shortstop than to anyone else, and then he had to make the longest throw to first. He also had to turn double plays, cover second on steals, keep runners on second from taking long leads, make relay throws from the outfield. Every Little League coach Henry had ever had took one look at him and pointed toward right field or second base. Or else the coach didn't point anywhere, just shrugged at the fate that had assigned him this pitiable shrimp, this born benchwarmer.

Bold nowhere else in his life, Henry was bold in this: no matter what the coach said, or what his eyebrows expressed, he would jog out to shortstop, pop his fist into Zero's pocket, and wait. If the coach shouted at him to go to second base, or right field, or home to his mommy, he would keep standing there, blinking and dumb, popping his fist. Finally

someone would hit him a grounder, and he would show what he could do.

What he could do was field. He'd spent his life studying the way the ball came off the bat, the angles and the spin, so that he knew in advance whether he should break right or left, whether the ball that came at him would bound up high or skid low to the dirt. He caught the ball cleanly, always, and made, always, a perfect throw.

Sometimes the coach would insist on putting him at second base anyway, or would leave him on the bench; he was that scrawny and pathetic-looking. But after some number of practices and games — two or twelve or twenty, depending on the stubbornness of the coach — he would wind up where he belonged, at shortstop, and his black mood would lift.

When he reached high school, things happened much the same. Coach Hinterberg later told him he'd planned to cut him until the last fifteen minutes of tryouts. Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw Henry make a diving stab of a scorching line drive and, while lying flat on his stomach, flip the ball behind his head and into the hands of the shocked second baseman: double play. The JV team carried an extra player that year, and the extra player wore a brand-new extra-small jersey.

By his junior year he was the starting varsity shortstop. After every game his mom would ask how many errors he'd made, and the answer was always Zero. That summer he played on a team sponsored by the local American Legion. He arranged his hours at the Piggly Wiggly so that he could spend weekends traveling to tournaments. For once, he didn't have to prove himself. His teammates and Coach Hinterberg knew that, even if he didn't hit home runs — had never, ever hit a home run — he would still help them win.

Midway through his senior season, though, a sadness set in. He was playing better than ever, but each passing inning brought him closer to the end. He had no hope of playing in college. College coaches were like girls: their eyes went straight to the biggest, bulkiest guys, regardless of

what those guys were really worth. Take Andy Tsade, the first baseman on Henry's summer team, who was going to St. Paul State on a full ride. Andy's arm was average, his footwork was sloppy, and he always looked to Henry to tell him where to play. He'd never read *The Art of Fielding*. But he was big and left-handed and every so often he crushed one over the fence. One day he crushed one over the fence with the St. Paul coach watching, and now he got to play baseball for four more years.

Henry's dad wanted him to come work at the metalworking shop—two of the guys were retiring at year's end. Henry said maybe he'd go to Lankton CC for a couple of years, take some bookkeeping and accounting classes. Some of his classmates were going to college to pursue their dreams; others had no dreams, and were getting jobs and drinking beer. He couldn't identify with either. He'd only ever wanted to play baseball.

The tournament in Peoria had been the last of the summer. Henry and his teammates lost in the semifinals to a team of enormous sluggers from Chicago. Afterward, he jogged back out to shortstop to take fifty practice grounders, the way he always did. There was nothing left to practice for, no reason to try to improve, but that didn't mean he didn't want to. As Coach Hinterberg tried to rip the ball past him, Henry imagined the same scenario as always: he was playing shortstop for the St. Louis Cardinals in Game 7 of the World Series, against the Yankees at Yankee Stadium, ahead by one, two outs, bases loaded. Make the last play and win it all.

As he was putting Zero into his bag, a hand gripped his shoulder and spun him around. He found himself face-to-face—or face-to-neck, since the other man was taller and wearing spikes—with the catcher from the Chicago team. Henry recognized him instantly: during the game he'd tipped Henry the pitch and then called him a name. He'd also hit a home run that cleared the center-field wall by thirty feet. Now he fixed his big amber eyes on Henry with a fierce intensity.

"I'm glad I found you." The catcher removed his huge sweaty hand from Henry's shoulder and proffered it. "Mike Schwartz."

Mike Schwartz's hair was matted and wild. Sweat and dirt streaked

his face. The sweat made his eye black bleed down his cheekbones onto his heavy stubble.

"I watched you taking ground balls," he said. "Two things impressed me. First, that you were out there working hard in this heat. Christ, I can barely walk. Takes dedication."

Henry shrugged. "I always do that after a game."

"The second thing is that you're a hell of a shortstop. Great first step, great instincts. I don't know how you got to half those balls. Where are you playing next year?"

"Playing?"

"What college. What college are you going to play baseball for?"

"Oh." Henry paused, embarrassed both by his failure to understand the question and by the answer he would have to give. "I'm not."

Mike Schwartz, though, seemed pleased by this. He nodded, scratched at the dark stubble on his jaw, smiled. "That's what you think."

Schwartz told Henry that the Westish Harpooners had been crappy for too many years to count, but with Henry's help they were going to turn it around. He talked about sacrifice, passion, desire, attention to detail, the need to strive like a champion every day. To Henry the words sounded beautiful, like reading Aparicio but better, because Schwartz was standing right there. On the drive back to Lankton, while crammed into the jump seat of Coach Hinterberg's Dodge Ram, he felt a kind of desolation come over him, because he figured he'd never hear from the big man again, but when he got home there was already a note on the kitchen table in Sophie's girlish handwriting: *Call Mike Shorts!*

Three days later, after three long conversations with Schwartz, conducted in secret while his parents were at work, Henry was beginning to believe. "Things are moving slowly," said Schwartz. "The whole Admissions office is on vacation. But they're moving. I got a copy of your high school transcript this morning. Nice job in physics."

"My transcript?" Henry asked, baffled. "How'd you do that?"

"I called the high school."

Henry was amazed. Perhaps that was obvious—if you want a transcript, call the high school. But he'd never met someone like Schwartz—someone who, when he wanted something, took immediate steps to acquire it. That night at dinner, he cleared his throat and told his parents about Westish College.

His mom looked pleased. "So Mr. Schwartz," she said, "he's the baseball coach at this college?"

"Um . . . not exactly. He's more like a player on the team."

"Oh. Well. Hm." His mom tried to keep looking pleased. "And you never met him before last Sunday? And now all this? I have to say, it sounds a little strange."

"Not to me." His dad blew his nose on his napkin, leaving the usual dark streak of steel-dust snot. "I'm sure Westish College needs all the money it can scrape together. They'll stick a hundred gullible suckers on the baseball team, as long as they pay their tuition."

This was the dark thought Henry had been working hard to suppress: that it was too good to be true. He steadied himself with a sip of milk. "But why would Schwartz care about that?"

Jim Skrimshander grunted. "Why does anybody care about anything?"

"Love," Sophie said. "He loves Henry. They talk on the phone all day long, like lovebirds."

"Close, Soph." Their dad pushed back his chair and carried his plate to the sink. "Money. I'm sure Mike Schwartz gets his cut. A thousand bucks a sucker."

Later that night, Henry relayed the gist of this conversation to Schwartz. "Bah," said Schwartz. "Don't sweat it. He'll come around."

"You don't know my dad."

"He'll come around."

When Henry didn't hear from Schwartz all weekend, he began to

feel glum and foolish about having gotten his hopes up. But on Monday night, his dad came home and put his uneaten bag lunch back in the fridge.

"Are you feeling okay, hon?" asked Henry's mom.

"I went out for lunch."

"How nice," she said. Henry had visited his dad on his lunch hour many times through the years: regardless of the weather, the guys sat outside on the benches that faced the road, backs to the shop, munching their sandwiches. "With the guys?"

"With Mike Schwartz."

Henry looked at Sophie — sometimes, when he found himself unable to speak, Sophie did it for him. Her eyes were as wide as his. "Well well!" she said. "Tell us more!"

"He dropped by the shop around lunchtime. Took me to Murdock's."

Flabbergasted was maybe not a strong or strange enough word to describe how Henry felt. Schwartz lived in Chicago, Chicago was five hundred miles away, and he'd dropped by the shop? And taken Henry's dad to Murdock's? And then driven back, without so much as telling Henry he'd done it, much less stopping by to say hello?

"He's a very serious young man," his dad was saying.

"Serious as in, Henry can go to Westish? Or serious as in, Henry *can't* go to Westish?"

"Henry can do whatever he wants. Nobody's stopping him from going to Westish or anywhere else. My only concern —"

"Yeay!" Sophie reached across the table and high-fived her brother. "College!"

"— is that he understands what he's in for. Westish is not your average school. The academics are tough, and the baseball team is a full-time commitment. If Henry's going to succeed there . . ."

. . . and Henry's dad, who so rarely strung four words together, especially on a Monday night, went on to talk for the rest of the meal about sacrifice, passion, desire, attention to detail, the need to strive like a

champion every day. He was talking just like Mike Schwartz, but he seemed not quite to realize it, and in fact he also sounded a good deal like himself, only in many more words, and with, Henry thought, a slightly more generous attitude toward his son's talents than usual. As his dad stood up to carry his plate to the sink, he clapped Henry on the shoulder and smiled broadly. "I'm proud of you, buddy. This is a big opportunity. Grab on to it."

It's a miracle, Henry thought. Mike Schwartz works miracles. After that, he continued to talk to Schwartz on the phone every night, making plans, working out details—but now he did so openly, in the family room, and his dad hovered nearby, the TV on mute, cigarette going, eavesdropping and shouting out comments. Sometimes Schwartz would ask to talk to Jim. Henry would hand his dad the phone, and his dad would sit down at his desk and go over the Skrimshanders' tax returns.

"Thanks," Henry said into the phone, feeling sentimental, on the day he bought his bus ticket. "Thank you."

"Don't sweat it, Skrim," Schwartz said. "It's football season, and I'm going to be busy. You settle in. I'll be in touch, okay?"

"Phumber 405," said the smiling woman. She thrust a key and a paper map into his hand, pointed to the left. "Small Quad."

Henry slipped through a cool aperture between two buildings and emerged on a bright, bustling scene. This wasn't Lankton CC: this was college in a movie. The buildings matched—each four or five stories high and made of squat gray weather-beaten stone, with deep-set windows and peaked, gabled roofs. The bike racks and benches were freshly painted navy. Two tall guys in shorts and flip-flops staggered toward an open doorway beneath the weight of a gigantic flat-screen TV. A squirrel tore down out of a tree and bumped against the leg of the guy walking backward—he screamed and dropped to his knees, and the corner of the TV sank into the plush new sod. The other guy laughed. The

squirrel was long gone. From an upper window somewhere drifted the sound of a violin.

Henry found Phumber Hall and climbed the stairs to the top floor. The door marked 405 stood slightly ajar, and bleepy, bloopy music came through the gap. Henry lingered nervously in the stairwell. He didn't know how many roommates he'd have, or what sort of roommates they might be, or what kind of music that was. If he'd been able to imagine the students of Westish College in any specific way, he imagined twelve hundred Mike Schwartzes, huge and mythic and grave, and twelve hundred women of the sort Mike Schwartz might date: leggy, stunning, well versed in ancient history. The whole thing, really, was too intimidating to think about. He nudged the door with his foot.

The room contained two identical steel-frame beds and two sets of identical blond-wood desks, chairs, dressers, and bookshelves. One of the beds was neatly made, with a plush seafoam-green comforter and a wealth of fluffy pillows. The other mattress was bare but for an ugly ocher stain in roughly the size and shape of a person. Both bookshelves had already been neatly filled, the books arranged by author name from Achebe through Tocqueville, with the rest of the *T*s through *Z* piled on the mantel. Henry plunked his bags down on the ocher stain and drew his beat-up copy of Aparicio Rodriguez's *The Art of Fielding* out of his shorts' pocket. *The Art* was the only book he'd brought with him, the only book Henry knew deeply: suddenly it seemed like this might be a terrible flaw. He prepared to wedge it between Rochefoucauld and Roethke, but lo and behold there was already a copy there, a handsome hardcover with a once-cracked spine. Henry slid it out, turned it in his hands. Inscribed on the flyleaf, in a lovely calligraphic hand, were the words *Owen Dunne.*

Henry had been reading Aparicio on the overnight bus. Or at least he'd kept the book open on his lap as the dreary slabs of interstate rolled by. By this point in his life, reading Aparicio no longer really qualified as reading, because he had the book more or less memorized. He could flip

to a chapter, any chapter, and the shapes of the short, numbered paragraphs were enough to trigger his memory. His lips murmured the words as his eyes, unfocused, scanned the page:

26. *The shortstop is a source of stillness at the center of the defense. He projects this stillness and his teammates respond.*
59. *To field a ground ball must be considered a generous act and an act of comprehension. One moves not against the ball but with it. Bad fielders stab at the ball like an enemy. This is antagonism. The true fielder lets the path of the ball become his own path, thereby comprehending the ball and dissipating the self, which is the source of all suffering and poor defense.*
147. *Throw with the legs.*

Aparicio played shortstop for the St. Louis Cardinals for eighteen seasons. He retired the year Henry turned ten. He was a first-ballot Hall of Famer and the greatest defensive shortstop who ever lived. As a ballplayer, Henry had modeled himself after his hero in every particular, from the gliding, two-handed way he fielded grounders, to the way he wore his cap pulled low to shield his eyes, to the three taps he gave his heart before stepping into the batter's box. And of course the jersey number. Aparicio believed that the number 3 had deep significance.

3. *There are three stages: Thoughtless being. Thought. Return to thoughtless being.*
33. *Do not confuse the first and third stages. Thoughtless being is attained by everyone, the return to thoughtless being by a very few.*

There were, admittedly, many sentences and statements in *The Art* that Henry did not yet understand. The opaque parts of *The Art,* though, had always been his favorites, even more than the detailed and extremely helpful descriptions of, say, how to keep a runner close to second base

(*flirtation,* Aparicio called it) or what sort of cleats to wear on wet grass. The opaque parts, frustrating as they could be, gave Henry something to aspire to. Someday, he dreamed, he would be enough of a ballplayer to crack them open and suck out their hidden wisdom.

213. *Death is the sanction of all that the athlete does.*

The bleepy, bloopy music lulled. Henry became aware of a murmurous sound that seemed to be coming from behind a closed door in the corner of the room. He'd thought it was a closet, but now he pressed his ear to it and heard a rush of running water. He knocked softly.

No response. He twisted the knob, and a sharp yelp rang out as the door struck something solid. Henry jerked the door shut. But that was a foolish thing to do—it wasn't as if he could run away. He opened the door again, and again it cracked against something solid.

"Ow!" came a cry from inside. "Please stop!"

The room turned out to be a bathroom, and a person about Henry's age was lying on the black-and-white checkerboard tile, clutching the top of his head. His ashen hair was cropped close, and between the fingers of his canary-yellow rubber gloves Henry could see a cut edged with blood. Water ran in the tub, and a toothbrush lay at his side, frothing with grainy, aqua-flecked cleanser. "Are you okay?" Henry asked.

"This grout is filthy." The young man sat up, rubbed his head. "You'd think they would clean the grout." His skin was the color of weak coffee. He put on a pair of wire-rimmed glasses and surveyed Henry from head to toe. "Who are you?"

"I'm Henry," Henry said.

"Really?" The young man's lunular eyebrows lifted. "Are you sure?"

Henry looked down at the palm of his right hand, as if that might be the place to find some irrefutable sign of Henryness. "Pretty sure."

The young man rose to his feet and, after peeling off one of his bright-yellow gloves, pumped Henry's hand warmly. "I was expecting someone

larger," he explained. "Because of the baseball factor. My name's Owen Dunne. I'll be your gay mulatto roommate."

Henry nodded in a way he hoped was appropriate.

"I was supposed to have this room to myself." Owen swept one hand before him, as if spanning a broad vista. "It was part of my scholarship package, as the winner of the Maria Westish Award. I've always dreamed of living alone. Haven't you?"

Henry, actually, had always dreamed of living with someone who owned a copy of Aparicio's book. "Do you play baseball?" he asked, turning Owen's hardback *Art* in his hands.

"I've dabbled in the game," Owen said, and added somewhat mysteriously, "But not like you."

"What do you mean?"

"Last week I received a call from President Affenlight. Are you familiar with his *Sperm-Squeezers*?"

Henry was not. Owen nodded sympathetically. "Not surprising," he said. "It doesn't have much academic traction these days, though it was a seminal — ha! — work in its field. It was a great inspiration to me when I was fourteen, fifteen years old. Anyway, President Affenlight phoned me at my mother's house in San Jose and said that a student of considerable talents had been added to the freshperson class, and that though this was excellent news for the college as a whole, it posed a dilemma for the Housing office. Since I was the only member of the class with a single room, he wondered if I might be willing to forgo one of my scholarship's privileges and take on a roommate.

"Affenlight's a smooth talker," Owen continued. "He spoke so highly of you, and of the more abstract virtues of roommatehood, that I almost forgot to negotiate. Frankly, I find the professionalization of collegiate sport to be a rather despicable phenomenon. But if the administration was willing to buy me that" — he pointed a yellow-gloved finger at the sleek computer that sat atop his desk — "and to throw in a handsome

book allowance just to persuade me to live with you, then you must be quite a ballplayer. I'd be honored to throw the ball around sometime."

"They're giving you money to be my roommate?" Henry asked, so incredulous and confused that he barely registered Owen's offer. What could Mike Schwartz have possibly said or done to produce a situation in which the president of Westish called people on the phone and spoke highly of *him*? "Would it be rude . . . I mean . . . do you mind if I ask . . . ?"

Owen shrugged. "Probably nowhere near what they're paying you. But enough to buy that rug out there, which is an expensive rug, so please do not put your shoes on it. And enough to keep me in high-quality marijuana for the year. Well, maybe for the semester. Till Halloween, at least."

After that first encounter, Henry scarcely saw Owen. Most afternoons Owen would sweep into the room, remove certain notebooks from his satchel and replace them with certain other notebooks, or remove his handsome gray sweater and replace it with his handsome red sweater, and then sweep back out again with a word: "Rehearsal." "Protest." "Date." Henry would nod and, for however many seconds Owen was in the room, devote himself deeply to whatever assignment lay open in front of him, so as not to seem entirely useless and adrift.

The date was with Jason Gomes, a senior who starred in all of the campus plays. Before long Owen's notebooks and sweaters had migrated to Jason's room. In the mornings, as Henry walked to class, he would see them reading together at the campus coffee shop, Café Oo, Jason's hand laid atop Owen's as they lingered over their espresso and their books, some of whose titles were French. At dinnertime, as Henry sat alone in a dim alcove of the dining hall, trying to look both inconspicuous and content, Owen and Jason would wander in, gather fruit and crackers to sustain them through rehearsals, and wander back out again. After midnight, as Henry drew the shades to go to sleep, he would see them sharing a joint on the opposite stoop, Owen's head tipped sideways to rest

on his lover's shoulder. They didn't need to bother with food or sleep, or so it seemed to Henry: they were too busy, too happy, for such trivial concerns. Owen had written a three-act play, "a kind of neo-Marxian *Macbeth* set in an open-plan office," as he once described it, and Jason was playing the lead.

On a couple of weekends that fall, Jason drove home to Chicago or some suburb thereof. For Henry these weekends were a source of relief and joy. He had a friend, at least till Sunday night. Owen would spend the morning reading and drinking tea in his plaid pajamas, sometimes smoking a joint or staring idly at the face of his silent BlackBerry, until Henry, with careful nonchalance, asked whether he might like to go get brunch. Owen would look up over his round-rimmed glasses and sigh, as if Henry were an annoying child. But as soon as they got outside in the autumn air, Owen — usually still in his pajamas, with a sweater over the top — would begin to talk, answering questions Henry would never think to ask.

"It's with my full permission that he goes," he said, looking again at his phone that hadn't made a peep. "My full permission and understanding. We've established parameters for what's allowable behavior, and I'm quite certain that he abides by those parameters. We communicate openly, like adults. And I know that if I went along, it would change the entire nature of the experience."

Henry, who understood who *he* was and not much else, nodded thoughtfully.

"Not that I even *want* to go along, mind you. I really don't. I've said as much and I meant it. And I appreciate his honesty about what he wants at this stage of life. We're both young, he says, and I can't argue with that. But it bothers me nonetheless. For two reasons. Both of them indications of my retrograde sentimentality and general unfitness for modern life, I'm afraid. The first is that his family is there, his parents, his brother, his sister. He ate dinner with them last night. Can you imagine, four other humans who look and act anything like *that*? I want to meet

them, I admit it. I want to meet them quite badly. Which is perhaps embarrassing given that it's only been seven . . . six weeks since we met. God, six weeks. I'm so pathetic. But I know that if my mom lived within driving distance of here, I'd already have forced the two of them into a room together, just for the sake of my own stupid pleasure. You know?"

Henry nodded again, loaded his plate with pancakes.

"You shouldn't eat so much flour," Owen said, taking a single pancake for himself. "Even when I'm stoned I don't eat much flour. The other reason, of course, is that I'm a staunch monogamist. In practice, if not in theory. I can't help it. Do I acknowledge the oppressive, regressive nature of sexual exclusivity? Yes. Do I want that exclusivity very badly for myself? Also yes. There's probably some sort of way in which that's not a paradox. Maybe I believe in love. Maybe I just badly crave my mother's approval. Hang on a sec." Owen jogged back to the hot-food line, spatulaed up four more flapjacks, and slid them onto his plate. "Sorry to babble on like this, Henry. I think I'm immoderately stoned."

After brunch they went to the union to play Ping-Pong. Owen, even immoderately stoned, proved to be a surprisingly good player. His swings were gentle, but he never missed the table, and Henry, who hated to lose at Ping-Pong, had to hustle and grunt and sweat to stay ahead. All the while Owen spoke steadily about love and Jason and the contradictions of monogamy, paying no discernible attention to the game but still carving out subtle drop shots that sent Henry sprawling across the table. Occasionally Henry would interject a comment, to show that he was listening and interested, but for him monogamy was less a contradiction than a glamorous, possibly unattainable goal, the flip side of his virginity, and he kept his comments vague. Inexperience hadn't bothered him much in high school — he was only seventeen, after all — but here at Westish, where everyone was so much more sophisticated, not to mention older, it had already come to seem a rare affliction, one that, though not terribly hard to live with, would be both shameful to reveal and hard to remedy.

Still it felt beautiful to move, to play, and soon Henry was down to his T-shirt, leaking sweat. After each game he felt painfully sure that Owen would put down his paddle — he seemed gently bored, Owen did — but Owen, his high forehead dry, still wearing his sweater over his pjs, would merely murmur, "Well done, Henry," and deliver another cottony serve. They played until it was time for dinner, and afterward they returned to the union to watch the World Series, Henry leaning close to the screen to study the shortstops' moves, Owen lounging on the couch with an open book. Occasionally, roused by a gloomy thought, Owen would pull out his phone and gaze into its face, then tuck it away again.

Henry slept well that night, tired from four hours of Ping-Pong and somehow calmed by the soft snuffle of Owen's breathing. On Sunday evening Owen's phone finally buzzed, and he vanished again.

Even in Owen's absence, Phumber 405 suggested his whole existence so palpably that Henry, as he sat alone and bewildered on his bed, was often struck by the eerie thought that Owen was present and he himself was not. Owen's books filled the bookshelves, his bonsai trees and potted herbs lined the windowsills, and his sparse angular music played around the clock on his wireless stereo system. Henry could have changed the music, but he didn't own any music of his own, so he let it play on. Owen's expensive rug covered the floor, his abstract paintings the walls, his clothes and towels the closet shelves. There was one painting in particular that Henry liked, and he was glad that Owen had happened to hang it over his bed — it was a large rectangle, smeary and green, with thin white streaks that could easily have marked the foul lines of a baseball diamond. Owen's pot smoke hung in the air, mingled with the bracing citrus-and-ginger smells of his organic cleaning products, though Henry couldn't figure out when he smoked or cleaned, since he came home so rarely.

The only traces of Henry's existence, by contrast, were the tangle of sheets on his unmade bed, a few textbooks, a pair of dirty jeans draped over his chair, and taped-up pictures of his sister and Aparicio

Rodriguez. Zero sat on a closet shelf. *Get settled,* he thought, *and Mike will be in touch.* He would have liked to clean the bathroom, as a show of goodwill, but he could never find a speck of scum or grime worth cleaning. Sometimes he thought of watering the plants, but the plants seemed to be getting on fine without him, and he'd heard that overwatering could be deadly.

Though his classmates supposedly hailed from "all fifty states, Guam, and twenty-two foreign lands," as President Affenlight said in his convocation address, they all seemed to Henry to have come from the same close-knit high school, or at least to have attended some crucial orientation session he'd missed. They traveled in large packs, constantly texting the other packs, and when two packs converged there was always a tremendous amount of hugging and kissing on the cheek. No one invited Henry to parties or offered to hit him grounders, so he stayed home and played Tetris on Owen's computer. Everything else in his life seemed beyond his control, but the Tetris blocks snapped together neatly, and his scores continued to rise. He recorded each day's achievements in his physics notebook. When he closed his eyes at night the sharp-cornered shapes twisted and fell.

Before he'd arrived, life at Westish had seemed heroic and grand, grave and essential, like Mike Schwartz. It was turning out to be comic and idle, familiar and flawed — more like Henry Skrimshander. During his first days on campus, drifting silently from class to class, he didn't see Schwartz anywhere. Or, rather, he saw him everywhere. From the corner of his eye he would glimpse a figure that seemed finally, certainly, to be Schwartz. But when he whirled eagerly toward it, it turned out to be some other, insufficiently Schwartz-like person, or a trash can, or nothing at all.

In the southeast corner of the Small Quad, between Phumber Hall and the president's office, stood a stone figure on a cubic marble base. Pensive and bushy-bearded, he didn't face the quad, as might be expected of a statue, but rather gazed out toward the lake. He held a book open in

his left hand, and with his right he raised a small spyglass toward his eye, as if he'd just spotted something along the horizon. Because he kept his back to the campus, exposing to passersby the moss-filled crack that ran across his back like a lash mark, he struck Henry from the first as a deeply solitary figure, burdened by his own thoughts. In the loneliness of that September, Henry felt a peculiar kinship toward this Melville fellow, who, like everything else on campus that was human or human-sized, he had mistaken several times for Mike Schwartz.

3

That Thanksgiving was Henry's first holiday away from home. He spent it at the dining hall, working his new job as a dishwasher. Chef Spirodocus, the head of Dining Services, was a tough boss, always marching around inspecting your work, but the job paid more than Henry had ever made at the Piggly Wiggly in Lankton. He worked the lunch and dinner shifts, and afterward Chef Spirodocus gave him a sliced turkey breast to take back to Owen's minifridge.

Henry felt a surge of homesick joy when he heard his parents' voices on the phone that night, his mom in the kitchen, his dad lying on his back in the family room with the TV on mute, ashtray by his side, half-heartedly doing the stretches he was supposed to do for his back. In Henry's mind he could see his dad rolling his bent knees slowly from side to side. His pants rode up to his shins. His socks were white. Imagining the whiteness of those socks—the terrible clarity with which he could imagine it—brought a tear to Henry's eye.

"Henry." His mother's voice wasn't Thanksgiving-cheery, as he'd expected—it was chagrined, ominous, odd. "Your sister told us that Owen…"

He wiped away the tear. He should have known that Sophie would spill the beans. Sophie always spilled the beans. She was as keen to get a rise out of people, especially their parents, as Henry was to placate them.

"…is *gay*."

His mom let the word hang there. His dad sneezed. Henry waited.

"Your father and I are wondering why *you* didn't tell us."

"Owen's a good roommate," Henry said. "He's nice."

"I'm not saying gay people aren't nice. I'm saying, is this the best environment for *you,* honey? I mean, you share a bedroom! You share a bathroom! Doesn't it make you uncomfortable?"

"I sure hope so," said his dad.

Henry's heart fell. Would they make him come home? He didn't want to go home. His total failure so far — to make friends, to get good grades, or even to find Mike Schwartz — made him more loath to go home than if he were having — like everybody around him seemed to be having — the world's most wonderful time.

"Would they put you in a room with a *girl?*" his mom asked. "At your age? Never. Never in a million years. So why would they do this? It makes no sense to me."

If there was a flaw in his mom's logic, Henry couldn't find it. Would his parents make him switch rooms? That would be horrible, worse than embarrassing, to go to the Housing office and request a new room assignment — the Housing people would know instantly why he was asking, because Owen was the best possible roommate, neat and kind and rarely even home. The only roommate who'd want to be rid of Owen was a roommate who hated gay people. This was a real college, an enlightened place — you could get in trouble for hating people here, or so Henry suspected. He didn't want to get into trouble, and he didn't want a new roommate.

His mom cleared her throat, in preparation for a further revelation.

"We hear he's been buying you clothes."

Two weeks prior, on Saturday morning, Henry had been playing Tetris when Owen and Jason walked in, Owen calm and chipper as always, Jason sleepy-eyed and carrying a big paper cup of coffee. Henry closed the Tetris window, opened the website for his physics class. "Hi guys," he said. "What's up?"

"We're going shopping," said Owen.

"Oh, cool. Have fun."

"The *we* is inclusive. Please put on your shoes."

"Oh, ha, that's okay," Henry said. "I'm not much of a shopper."

"But you're not *not* a master of litotes," Jason said. *Lie-toe-tease.* Henry repeated it to himself, so that he could look it up later. "When we get back I'm burning those jeans."

"What's wrong with these jeans?" Henry looked down at his legs. It wasn't a rhetorical question: there was clearly something wrong with his jeans. He'd realized as much since arriving at Westish, just as he'd realized there was something wrong with his shoes, his hair, his backpack, and everything else. But he didn't know quite what it was. The way the Eskimos had a hundred words for *snow,* he had only one for *jeans.*

They drove in Jason's car to a mall in Door County. Henry went into dressing rooms and emerged for inspection, over and over.

"There," Owen said. "Finally."

"These?" Henry tugged at the pockets, tugged at the crotch. "I think these are kind of tight."

"They'll loosen up," Jason said. "And if not, so much the better."

By the time they finished, Owen had said *There, finally* to two pairs of jeans, two shirts, and two sweaters. A modest stack, but Henry added up the price tags in his mind, and it was more than he had in the bank. "Do I really need two?" he said. "One's a good start."

"Two," said Jason.

"Um." Henry frowned at the clothes. "Mmm . . ."

"Oh!" Owen slapped himself on the forehead. "Did I forget to mention? I have a gift card for this establishment. And I have to use it right away. Lest it expire." He reached for the clothes in Henry's hand. "Here."

"But it's yours," Henry protested. "You should spend it on yourself."

"Certainly not," Owen said. "I would never shop here." He pried the stack from Henry's hands, looked at Jason. "You guys wait outside."

So now Henry had two pairs of jeans that had loosened up slightly

but still felt way too tight. As he sat by himself in the dining hall, watching his classmates walk by, he'd noticed that they looked quite a bit like other people's jeans. *Progress,* he thought. *I'm making progress.*

"Is that true?" his dad said now. "You've got this guy buying you clothes?"

"Um . . ." Henry tried to think of a not-untrue response. "We went to the mall."

"Why is he buying you clothes?" His mom's voice rose again.

"I doubt if he buys Mike Schwartz clothes," Henry's dad said. "I doubt that very much."

"I think he wants me to fit in."

"*Fit in to what?* is maybe a question worth asking. Honey, just because people have more money than you doesn't mean you have to conform to their ideas about *fitting in.* You have to be your own person. Are we understood?"

"I guess so."

"Good. I want you to tell Owen thank you very much, but you cannot under any circumstances accept his gifts. You're not poor, and you don't have to accept charity from strangers."

"He's not a stranger. And I already wore them. He can't take them back."

"Then he can wear them himself."

"He's taller than me."

"Then he can donate them to someone in need. I don't want to discuss this anymore, Henry. Are we understood?"

He didn't want to discuss it anymore either. It dawned on him — as it hadn't before; he was dense, he was slow — that his parents were five hundred miles away. They could make him come home, they could refuse to pay the portion of his tuition they'd agreed to pay, but they couldn't see his jeans. "Understood," he said.