

CHAPTER 20: The Yard

I still don't think I needed to see Dr. Mackey to solve my problems. I probably could have figured all this stuff out by myself, eventually, except for maybe the letters part and a few other things. But he was nice to me. He listened, and he never told my parents what we talked about in his office or what I wrote in my journal, I don't think. I did learn some things from him. I think he was just trying to help me. But I still am scared of my mom dying, I'm still scared that I will lose her. And I'm still angry that she is sick again. I don't know if anyone, even Dr. Mackey, can ever take that feeling away.

When that scared and angry feeling comes into my head, Dr. Mackey told me, I should think about something that makes me feel good. So I try as hard as I can to think about baseball. I guess it's pretty obvious by now that baseball is by far my favorite sport. I guess it's my favorite thing, period. Sometimes the only place I have any real fun and really feel totally comfortable and happy other than when Arnie and I are riding bikes or sock fighting is when I'm playing baseball, when I'm down at The Yard.

During a game my mind is totally focused. I don't think about those wildflowers during the game, I don't think about anything but hitting, fielding, catching, my teammates, my coach, and winning. I



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don't think about Mom being sick or people dying or math class or the people I hate or who hate me. I just think about the game I'm playing at that very minute and what the score is and how many outs there are and trying to pick up the spin on a curve ball and that's it.

I like to play baseball, watch baseball, talk about baseball. I love to take the ball in my hand then throw it into the pocket of my leather glove, over and over and over. It's an awesome feeling to wrap the glove around the baseball and hold it tight. I collect baseball cards, too, and I know the names of the players on most teams in the pros, at least the starters, and especially the San Diego Padres, my favorite team, and the Chicago Cubs, my second favorite team, and the Red Sox, my third favorite team.

I like the Padres because they play in San Diego, a city I visited with my family when I was eight that I really liked because they have beautiful beaches there and I love the ocean. I also like the Padres because for a long time they had a great pitcher named Trevor Hoffman and Trevor is my little brother's name.

This year I play for the Pirates. I'm not a big fan of the real Pirates team, which is from Pittsburgh, and our uniform is kind of funky, but it wasn't my choice to play for the Pirates. You don't get to choose which team you play for in my Little League. They tell you who to play for. But that's OK because we have a good team and I like the guys on the team this year. The name and the uniform don't really matter to me, and most of the kids think it's a cool name because of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies and most kids would rather be a Pirate than a Dodger, whatever that is, or a Cub, which sounds kind of lame. It would be pretty cool to be a Diamondback, though, because that's a snake.

My baseball coach, Mr. Dilsaver, has a beard and drives an old van from the 1970s, which was way before I was born. He knows a lot about baseball and music, especially classic rock. He's teaching me to bunt right now and I'm not very good yet but I'm a pretty fast learner. He thinks bunting is important. I'd rather swing away because I'm a good hitter, but I guess bunting is important to know especially if



you're trying to advance the runner and especially if you become a pro pitcher. Pitchers don't hit very well, I guess because they spend all their time working on their pitching and because they don't play every day, so they have to bunt a lot. I play shortstop this year but I still pitch, too. I'm pitching tomorrow. I've been practicing bunting at the batting cages, but unfortunately our batting cages in town only have fastballs, they don't have curveballs.

I'm definitely happiest when I'm down at The Yard in the spring and summer, even when there isn't a game going on, but especially when there is and it's one of my games. I feel like I belong there. I don't have any worries when I'm focused on baseball. I feel most comfortable with a baseball glove in my hand, or a bat or a ball. I wear my Little League team cap most of the time, even in the winter. I even wear it to school sometimes, and I almost always wear it when I'm riding my bike around the neighborhood.

I think everyone around here thinks of me as a baseball player, and that's how I want people to know me because that's what I do best and that's what I love the most. Baseball is America's pastime and as my coach always says it teaches you teamwork and cooperation and camaraderie and sportsmanship and toughness and discipline and patience. I've made a lot of good friends through baseball. But more than that, I just love to play the game. It's a great sport. It's fun and it's a challenge.

This time of year, when baseball season's already started but we're still in school, on a weekday when I have an afternoon game I can hardly concentrate on my schoolwork, especially after lunch. By 2 p.m. I'm totally thinking about the game: who's pitching, how am I gonna hit, I hope it doesn't rain, what the other team's record is, stuff like that.

I've been playing baseball since T-ball when I was six years old, and I think I'm getting better every year. Hopefully next year I'll make the middle school team. I think I will, but there'll be kids I don't even know from other schools and other neighborhoods and other leagues trying out. It'll be a challenge, but I like challenges.

Almost everyone I know and like is into baseball. Arnie's a first



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baseman, a good one. Arnie's what I call a smooth player. The way he plays, he looks like he never really tries very hard, but he does, and he looks like he never gets nervous and he doesn't make many errors and he never swings the bat too hard, but he does. He makes baseball look so easy and believe me, it isn't. If it was that easy I wouldn't like it as much.

Arnie and I don't play on the same team this season. I can't wait until we play each other this year. We play twice, the first time in July some time. I hope I pitch that game. We're both competitive and I know when I come up to bat he's going to give me a hard time. But that's the other team's job. They try to rattle the hitters. I don't get rattled easy at the plate, though. Hitting's what I do best and Arnie knows it.

My whole family likes baseball. My dad played as a kid and even in high school before he went to Drake University, which is in Des Moines. He was a third baseman and still throws the ball really hard. My mom played softball as a kid. She played first base. She's a lefty like Arnie, which I think is interesting. Two of my favorite people are left-handed, and left-handers are pretty rare. My mom, who also really loves playing tennis, even writes left-handed. I've tried to do that but it comes out looking like baby writing.

I never wanted to play third base like my dad. Not that I'm afraid of playing third, but the fact is they do get the hardest balls hit at them, and they have the longest throw to first base. It takes guts to play third. All athletes have guts. As someone who loves baseball, and all sports, I really feel for athletes when they get sick and can't play. And I think any athlete should admire people who are sick. It takes guts to fight sickness.

There are a lot of great athletes who have been sick. Like the famous New York Yankees player Lou Gehrig, who they made a movie about and named a disease after. Joe Torre, the Los Angeles Dodgers' manager who used to be the Yankees' manager, had cancer. I'm not a Dodgers fan, but I admire him. And there's Andres Gallaraga, who played for



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the Atlanta Braves and Colorado Rockies and I think maybe one or two other teams. He was a great home run hitter and a really popular player. He had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma just like my mom. So did golfer Paul Azinger. And so did a famous football quarterback my dad told me about named Joe Ferguson, who played for the Buffalo Bills and who one year had 25 touchdown passes.

My dad was a big Bills fan as a kid and still is. Joe Ferguson has survived lymphoma for a long time and I know in my heart that my mom, who is a good athlete, will survive it, too. There are a lot of women who have survived cancer, including Olivia Newton-John, who was in the movie *Grease*, which our whole family likes. She has survived a type of cancer called breast cancer for a long time.

The good news is that all these people I just mentioned except for Lou Gehrig are still alive, which just shows you that diseases like cancer don't kill everyone. There are lots of different types of cancer, from lymphoma to breast cancer to leukemia to prostate cancer to brain cancer to skin cancer to lung cancer. But you can survive. You can live and still have cancer. There are lots of new medical treatments for so many different types of cancer, especially lymphoma.

I read a lot of cancer books now, pretty much whenever I'm in the library. I look for them in the newspaper, too, and whenever I'm online, I Google cancer stories. My mom tells me that scientists are making progress in their research. They're trying to find a cure, and they're making progress. And my mom tells me that this radio-immunotherapy treatment she is going to take is going to be great and that she is hoping it will make her well for a long time. I hope so, too. I'm optimistic that my mom will win this fight. But it doesn't mean my fear of her dying or anger over her being sick have gone away completely. I'm doing the best I can to get rid of them, but they're still here.

