

## **MY FATHER'S COURT**

by

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The boy stands with his father, ankle-deep in fresh-fallen snow, on the wide concrete step outside the back door of the high school gymnasium. A few straggling snowflakes flitter from an oatmeal sky. The boy's father takes off one glove, pins it in his armpit, and searches the brass key ring attached to his belt, isolating each key and holding it up to the diffused light of the street lamp behind them, because the light above the back door isn't working. "Have to fix that, too," the boy's father says about the bulb. "I'll catch hell from the coach if they have to tromp through here in the dark."

A laugh pops out of him in a cloud of cold air. The same laugh, nervous and childlike, that irritates the boy's mother so. *You won't think it's so funny*, he hears her say, *when you wake up some morning and find me gone.*

Recently, the boy has realized he and his father share the same curly dark hair and green eyes. They both like Abbott and Costello, who the boy's mother calls, *Idiots. A pair of clowns.*

"I don't think this is it," the boy's father says about one key, then forces it anyway. "I already tried this one, I think," he says about another. But this one turns, making the lock click free. "Eureka, Watson!" he cries. When he jerks open the door, the warm air pouring out stings the boy's tight cold cheeks. Even his eyebrows feel stiff.

“At least the furnace is working tonight,” his father says. The boy follows him upstairs, imagining the horror of an ice-cold gym. “Here we are.” The door closes, trapping them in the immense dark.

Lights pop on, a row of them, then another, and the formless dark gives way to a high ceiling and walls, and a floor of pure magic. To the boy it's as gloriously breathtaking as a baseball diamond; more so, because it is a floor and it's been painted – black lines around the edge and more in front of each basket, and in the center a big blue circle with a white “S” in the middle. Superman, the boy thinks, although he knows it stands for Stanton, the high school's name.

“We don't want to cross that line.” His father points to the black border, and the boy steps back as if at the edge of a lake during spring thaw. “Not with our boots on, we don't.” He laughs. “It's the law.”

He unlocks a door in the corner that opens to a closet large as a garage. Inside are rolled-up mats, a folded trampoline. He drops the paper bag he's been carrying onto a card table in front, next to a rack of basketballs, and sits on a folding chair to yank off his boots. The boy tugs his off, too, and when his father picks them up they leave a little puddle of melted snow on the concrete floor.

“You have to wear sneakers to be allowed on the court,” his father explains as they put theirs on. Their boots are lined up on top of the newspaper, the large boots and the small boots matching the way the boy and his father would look if they, too, stood side by side.

“Socks would be okay. They used to have sock hops. That's a dance. The kids took off their shoes and danced around the floor in their socks.”

He grabs a long-handled dust mop. "You want to shoot baskets?" The boy shakes his head. His father removes his shirt, leaving him in a white tee bunched up in back, where the blue band of his boxer shorts sticks out above the waist of his pants.

As he pushes the dust mop, the floor that already shines, glows even brighter in his wake. There are wide empty lanes on either side of the court, then a single row of bleachers, eight feet high, against each wall. The boy is wondering how people will climb up there when his father puts a key into a hole in the cement-block wall, then grabs the bottom slat and begins to walk backwards, toward the court. The bleachers follow, opening like an accordion, one row and then another, and another above that.

When people start arriving, the boy finds a place on the stage behind one basket, where his father has lined up two rows of chairs. He sits on the end, next to the big red curtain that smells of mildew and dust. His father calls him over to meet the coach. "This is my son, Jay," his father says. "Jay, this is Coach Morelli."

The coach is taller than the boy's father, and muscular, with a weathered face beneath crewcut white hair. His huge calloused hand swallows the boy's.

"Pleased to meet you, Jay." He has a deep voice and a face that seems unable to smile even when he wants to. The boy cannot bring himself to speak.

"I guess we've had enough snow to carry us through the whole winter," the boy's father says.

Suddenly the floor begins to tremble. There's a sound like stampeding horses, and the doors to the locker room burst open and a dozen enormous bodies pour forth, all dressed in blue and white.

All the players seem like giants. The boy has heard of professional players standing seven feet tall, but on television they all look small.

During warm-ups the boy moves to the balcony above the far basket. He likes the perspective of looking down over everything. Beyond where the players shoot lay-ups stands his father, arms folded, chatting to anyone who passes by.

The buzzer sounds in the gym now bloated with heat and noise, and the boy races downstairs, hoping to make it back to the stage before the game begins. Halfway there, he hears the announcer say, "Will everyone please rise for our national anthem." The crowd rises in a single whoosh, and the boy freezes, backing into the people crowding around him, and placing his hand over his heart as a scratching sound fills the air, then the anthem explodes from the loudspeakers.

The moment it ends the boy races for the stage. People clap and stamp their feet. Passing the corner where his father has been standing, the boy spots him in the storage closet, bending over an old record player. He looks up and laughs. "Just call me Harry Phillip Sousa."

The game is close throughout the first half. Stanton's best player is Nate Williamson, the only black player on either team, a guard who darts around swiping the ball and racing away like a speedy little kid taunting bullies. The boy favors Tommy Bishop, a muscular forward who always seems to get the rebound. Big for his age and chubby, the boy can easily pretend to be Tommy, who has short dark hair neatly trimmed and a stoic expression whether he's just scored a basket or been called for a foul he didn't commit.

At halftime, his father buys the boy an ice cream sandwich that melts fast in the heat, coating his hands with chocolate and sticky cream. "You'd better go to the men's room and wash up," his father advises, leading him along the narrow trail between the court's black line and the

first row of bleachers, saying hello to a half-dozen people along the way. A line stretches out through the propped-open bathroom door. Although relieved when his father leaves him, the boy feels lost in the forest of men.

When he comes out his father is pushing the big dust mop up and down the floor again. He decides to watch the second half from the balcony. Above and behind the basket, he has a clear view of Tommy Bishop muscling rebounds. The game is tense, the other team leading by three points as the fourth quarter begins. The movement and colors and noise and heat all merge together, and leaning over the balcony rail, the boy becomes Tommy Bishop grabbing a rebound, tapping it against the backboard so softly it drops through the hoop, bringing his team within one point with thirty seconds to play. The crowd leaps to its feet, then settles into rhythmic clapping as the other team calls time out.

When play resumes the other team plays keep-away to run out the clock, forcing Nate Williamson to foul their best shooter, a guard.

The lights on the scoreboard above where the boy's father stands read :09. The score is 54-53. The guard has one-and-one, getting the second shot only if he makes the first. Making both will put his team up by three, and there is no three-point shot.

A rumbling rises from every corner of the gym, crescendoing as the guard walks to the free throw line. "Miss it!" the boy screams.

The ball hits the rim, bounces once, and falls off into the sure hands of Tommy Bishop. He whips a pass to Nate Williamson, who slices between two opposing players racing down the court, stops at his favorite spot at the top of the key and goes straight into the air. The boy is perfectly positioned to watch the orange ball rise out of those two black hands, pause at its

highest point as if it is a balloon about to float away, then drop through the hoop as the buzzer sounds and the crowd erupts.

The boy jumps up and down. On the court, players and fans mob Nate Williamson.

Later, after the gym has emptied, the boy's father removes his shirt again, lifts the bottom of the lowest bleacher and pushes until that row folds into the one above it, then both into the one above that, until all the bleachers again look like a single bench against the wall, eight feet high. Dust and trash coat the floor the bleachers covered.

Exhausted, the boy sits on the floor by the stage, wishing the players downstairs would finish dressing and leave so his father could take him home.

His father picks up something off the floor. "What do you know?" he says. "A quarter." He holds out his hand. "Here, you have it."

The quarter seems large compared to the nickels and dimes the boy is used to. "Sometimes I make out pretty good going through here," his father says, gesturing toward the trash. "The change falls out of people's pockets. One time I found a five-dollar bill."

This wakes the boy up. "I have to put the bleachers up on the other side," his father says. "If you want to look around here while I'm doing that, you can keep whatever you find."

His words transform the trash heap into a treasure trove the boy searches methodically, unearthing another quarter, two dimes, and seven pennies.

"Now try the other side," his father instructs. "That side's where the visiting team's fans sit, so usually there are more adults." He laughs. "Adults have more money to lose than kids."

The dollar bill the boy finds, folded up beneath a cup, proves his father's words true. The boy will be a father himself, his own father gone, before he considers that his father might have planted it.

That night, he clutches the money in his sweaty palm, dreaming of baseball cards, midget race cars, Pez. Overcome by fatigue once again, he pushes the money carefully into his pants pocket and sits in the chair his father has taken down off the stage. "It won't be long now," his father says.

When the door opens, the boy jerks out of the sleep he's been tumbling into. Not five feet away, his shiny dark hair slicked back, a gym bag slung over one shoulder, stands Tommy Bishop. He wears a blue and white letterman's jacket with a football on the front, and snow boots nearly to his knees.

Nate Williamson follows him, wearing a gray rain coat that doesn't look warm enough for the winter, gray dress pants, and shiny black shoes.

"Drained that sucker, stopped on a dime." Nate's voice has a lilt like poetry.

The boy's father, scraping some gum stuck to the floor beneath the bleachers, calls, "Hey, boys."

"Hey, Skinner," Nate replies. The boy does not know what the nickname means, but it does not sound complimentary.

"Good game tonight, boys."

Tommy Bishop grabs a ball off the rack and flips it to Nate. "Show us the touch."

As Nate drops his bag and bounces the ball, the boy's father calls good-naturedly, "No shoes on the court, boys."

Nate ignores him. "You get under the basket," he tells Tommy. "Snatch that rebound and feed me the outlet pass."

"Come on, boys." His father has risen to his feet. "We don't want to damage the floor."

When Tommy tries to flip the ball off the rim, it goes through the hoop instead. "You got to miss, man. You got to miss so I can make my shot."

"Come on, boys," the boy's father says again

Tommy shoots and misses, but the ball skirts from his grasp and dribbles toward the boy's feet. He bends down and picks it up.

This next the boy will remember all his life. Tommy has taken several steps in his direction. Hands extended, he nods for the ball. Beneath his still-damp hair, there's a squareness to his jaw and the promise of something simple and honest in his brown eyes. In the distance beyond Tommy's shoulder stands the boy's father. His baggy pants sag beneath the bulge of his belly. Pale bony shoulders, weak red face. The stick of the mop he holds rises taller than he is.

The boy will be unable to recall the emotion in his father's face. Understanding? Gentle forgiveness? His father was that kind of man. Or did he feel it like a knife the boy's hands pushed forward, instead of the ball that curled into the air, pausing at its highest point as if it were a balloon about to float away, before settling into the hands of Tommy Bishop, who spun and whipped a pass to the already running Nate Williamson?

Nate caught the ball like a wide receiver, dribbled once to gain his balance, and rose into the air. The ball soared from his hand, clanked the rim, and dropped harmlessly to one side.

"Shit," Nate hisses. Landing, his heel gashes a long black streak in the floor.

"That's all right," Tommy consoles. "You hit that shot when it counted."

"You got that right."

Nate grabs his bag. They button up their coats in preparation for the cold. "Take it easy, Skinner," Nate calls. "Little Skinner, too."

Cold air rushes in when they open the door. The boy's father laughs. "They're pretty excited about the game." He walks to the top of the key to inspect the damage done by Nate's shoes.

The boy waits in silence, thoughts turned to his mother sitting glumly in front of the television at home, while his father on hands and knees scrubs those marks with steel wool.