

A stylized illustration of a baseball catcher from a rear perspective. The catcher is wearing a blue jersey with the number '22' on the back, white pants, and a blue cap. He is holding a baseball in his left hand and a catcher's mitt in his right. The background shows a night baseball field with stadium lights and a starry sky.

CATCHER

By
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This is a story told from the stands, about a seventeen-year-old boy and his friends, together on a baseball field for the last time. A rec-league championship is at stake in back-to-back grudge matches played out on a warm July night under lights.

The boy is my son and firstborn child. The day of the championship, he sent a text message to his friend, who would be pitching: *Tonight is the most important game of our short lives.*

I know about the text only because the friend told his mom, who told me in the stands that night. It wasn't easy, learning that some boys talk to their parents, casually tossing them tidbits like small, rolled-up bread balls to a pond of ducks. Information about my son's life seems always to come from secondary sources: his friends, their parents, his younger sister, teachers and coaches, snatches of conversation mixed with video game gunfire drifting up from the basement.

He's a catcher, and the position's protective armor suits him. *You can come to the games if you don't cheer for me*, he told me as a child. *You are not allowed to call out my name.*

But this is a story about baseball.

Most of these boys have been smacking at tee balls, playing with or against each other, since they still had all their baby teeth. For years I have watched my son's back as he crouched behind the plate, learning to read the language of his spine, the flexing and clenching of his free hand, the subtle movement of his head signaling the pitcher, every twitch an indicator of mood and momentum, ire and fatigue. As a team, the Pirates have been together for seven

years. We parents, interlaced by our long history together on bleachers and collapsible chairs, have an easy camaraderie, a friendship built on seasons of accumulated innings.

That night the Pirates badly wanted the win, to leave their high school playing fields as victors. Not another runners-up trophy like last year. All of them just graduated high school and in another month they would head off to colleges, jobs and different lives. It was the end of an era and they knew it.



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In fairness to the reader, it should be revealed here that no dramatic play-by-play narrative of the actual games are forthcoming. There were no fights, no injuries, no walk-off home runs to report, no egregious, game-losing error that will burn in some boy's memory for years.

But there was damn good baseball. The Pirates were sheer pleasure to watch that final summer because they played with abandon—not recklessly, but without fear of disappointing their coaches or parents, each other, or even themselves. They had passed from childlike exuberance to starry-eyed dreams of big league glory to the often-humorless intensity of the travel ball circuit. Now with summer jobs and a need for more flexibility, they had gone back to rec-league ball for their last two years. They played for the love of baseball and for each other, and it

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made them less tense, more agile. Their games were studded with heroic diving catches and dramatic slides, brazen steals and fierce rundowns. They swung for the fences. They even waved a pirate flag, white skull and crossbones on a field of black.



The night of the championship playoffs, my son had to catch all fourteen innings – five and a half hours of continuous play. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a player with more passion on that field,” the third baseman’s father said to my husband and me late in the second game. “To catch with that kind of effort for two solid games is pretty amazing.”

I looked at my son and wondered if this was a glimmer of the man he might be turning into, someone who will dig deep for his own reserves of strength in a test of endurance. This is the best part of being a spectator in a game that involves someone for whom you care deeply: You get to study him closely, unabashedly, without them observing you.



In the end, the Pirates will have won the first game and lost the second, the championship slipping through their hands. The victors will whoop and dog pile, then gather up their gear and head to the parking lot.

The scene that followed is what stays with me. I have written about it again and again and cannot do it justice. I cannot get it right. I can merely attempt to describe it as a witness would; a bystander huddled with other parents at a respectful distance.

After the winning team left the field, the air seemed to shift and cool. Under the banks of lights, in the illuminated bowl of the black summer night, something I can only call a shimmer rose up from the field, the kind of presence one senses at beginnings and endings, at portals of profound change.

The boys couldn’t bring themselves to leave. One by one, they lay down in the field, sinking into the grass like tired shepherds. Some of them drew their knees up. Some stretched out flat on their backs, arms spread wide. One of the pitchers walked to the mound and took a long look around. Then he

walked all four bases, head down.

A few players stood glazed, as if imprinting the memory of a disappearing native terrain. All of them wept—quietly, openly. The scene appeared pinned in place, a diamond in a black velvet case.

Eventually the boys slowly rose to their feet, almost in unison, without speaking. A thick fog rose, too, ankle deep, a dense white carpet that hid their cleats. They gathered bags and bats from the bench and walked to their cars in silence.

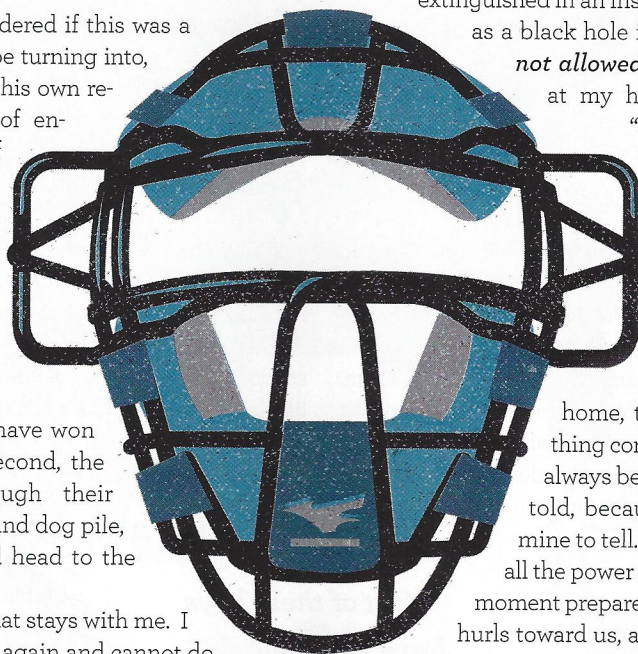
Everyone except my son, who headed off to the outfield, alone. A few seconds later the lights went out, clanking off like a heavy church door closing shut, all that blazing candlepower extinguished in an instant. The night absorbed my boy

as a black hole in space swallows stars. **You are not allowed to call out my name.** I looked

at my husband. His cheeks were wet. “Should we wait for him?” I asked. He shook his head. “No. He’ll be fine. Let’s go.”

On the drive home, the fog began to dissipate. The night came into sharp focus: the strength and swiftness with which our son moved now, the coming weight of his absence at

home, the consummate ache of something coming to its natural close. This will always be a spectator’s story, inadequately told, because in the end the story is not mine to tell. What we love we must love with all the power and grace of the catcher, at every moment prepared to hold on to what the universe hurls toward us, and in the next fluid turn, release it to other waiting hands. ■



Author’s Note: It took me four years and a dozen or more major revisions to write “Catcher.” I had scrawled pages and pages of notes immediately after the game that serves as its centerpiece. The challenge was to somehow relay how profoundly moving the night had been for all of us—this very ordinary scene of teen aged boys playing baseball—without sounding saccharine or overly sentimental. The turning point was realizing that my husband and I were truly spectators of this milestone, that it would always be our son’s story and not ours. As a writer and as a mother, that was the discovery I needed to do the story justice.