Winners and Losers

The ball did not cross the goal line. It wasn't really even that close. If your angle was obscured, or if you had taken up one of the positions on the far hill, well away from the action but in the blessed shade, then, maybe you would think it went in. Or if you were one of those goody-two-shoes who pontificated on the sidelines about referees being human and sometimes making mistakes, and this is just a game after all, and that generally speaking refs get it right about 99% of the time, blah blah blah, then, maybe you weren't outraged by the call; or, if you were on the winning side, maybe you left gratefully bewildered, even as you knew it was a mistake.

I knew it was a bad call. But I blew the whistle and pointed at the goal and then the midline. I also ignored the linesman nearest to me. I didn't want to see him, didn't want to pretend I had no idea what that look on his face meant, that silent, pleading look that said I'd gotten it wrong.

Instead, I turned my gaze to Joanna Benson. She was the one who'd taken the shot. She was, then, the de facto goal-scorer. The goal also made her father, Douglass, the winning coach. What I saw in my mind's eye in that flash of space between Joanna's kick and my call was Douglass charging onto the field, weaving through the twenty-two players, and finding Joanna, who, despite being a teenager, would leap into his arms. The two of them, father and daughter, would share an unembarrassed public display of love and affection in front of two teams, two linesmen, a referee, and two sidelines full of parents.

So I blew the whistle and made winners of them both.

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I first met Douglass at elementary school orientation when our daughters entered kindergarten in the same year. We were two of only three dads there and, consciously or not, we took seats next to each other. On some primordial level, I suspect we were terrified by the nervous, estrogen-laced tension in the room. We loved our kids, sure, but we hadn't carried them and so couldn't begin to imagine the emotion involved in traversing the blink-of-an-eye distance from birthing to handing over our precious charge to the whims of the local public school system. The keynote speaker and answerer of questions (she said "there are no stupid questions" so many times that I got the sense she deemed every question as really rather stupid), there to assure us that everything would be just fine, was a veteran mom with five kids in the school, ranging from grade six down to kindergarten.

"It's a miracle she managed to get off her back long enough to make it here," the third dad whispered. He was smirking and slouching in his chair and had his arms crossed, full of defensiveness for . . . what? Being male, I suppose. Later, he sidled up to us during the break. As we made small talk over cookies and disgustingly sweet "fruit" punch, he yammered on about the "talent" in the room, pointing out specifically the leggy blonde who had shoehorned the veteran keynote and was asking her a series of questions with her manicured nails perched—digging, it looked like—on the poor woman's forearm.

That was the cue for Douglass and me to attach ourselves to each other and exclude the idiot. Let's be honest: we were checking out the women, too. I mean, of course we were. But at least we had the decency to pretend otherwise, to remind ourselves that we were there was because of our kids, and that when it was over, we'd dutifully head home and report everything to our waiting wives. And we'd do it happily. Douglass and I could be secure in knowing that we

were better men, more evolved, not only accepting of our wives' equal status within the family hierarchy, but celebrating it.

Of course, the second point of intersection between us was that we would both voluntarily spit on the sanctity of our marriages by cheating on our wives with much younger women. But that would come later. For now, we were young dads doing our duty. And what great guys we were. We could tell ourselves that then.

Douglass and I never did become more than just casual acquaintances. We'd see each other at assemblies and plays and other events in the sweaty confines of the school "cafetorium." But our daughters, while classmates, never became friends. Outside of school events, they often landed on the same invite list to birthday parties and such, so we'd run into each other during pick-up. We'd nod, say hello, occasionally shake hands and engage in small talk. But that was as far as it went.

His daughter Joanna was a striking kid. Physically, she was very pretty. But that's not what made her stand out. It was something deeper, something internal. She possessed a quality of age well beyond her actual years. You'd see it in school plays, for instance. While the other kids swam in their too-large costumes or flubbed lines with maddening regularity, Joanna seemed to literally inhabit her characters' psyches. No matter if she were cast in the role of a thousand year old wizard or 19th century Great Plains pioneer, she'd nod behind her beard or sweep her straw colored hair from underneath her bonnet, and the characters' trials and tribulations, light years from our suburban Baltimore existence, would not only shine through but would reach the back rows, where the last line of chairs were stacked against the doors that admitted the school day's food lines.

Douglass and I both coached our daughter's soccer teams, and we had gotten into it in the same way, dragooned by way of desperate email pleas which explained that without volunteers to lead the girls, the teams would have to fold. This was rec soccer, and the prospect of herding a dozen or so kids around a ball was about as attractive to most as a colonoscopy, so there were few takers. But we saw it as an opportunity to spend time with our kids outside of the house, a real bonding experience. I loved it for the three years I did it. Eventually my daughter gave up soccer for dance, and my coaching days ended. But I had come to enjoy being out on the field on Saturdays, loved the late season fall crispness in the air and the smell of fresh grass and chewed mud, and I loved watching kids engage in sport instead of smartphone. So I got my referee's license. And every Saturday I strapped on my blacks and prepared to be abused. But the truth was, very few parents or coaches ever actually got on me too badly. The key, obviously, was to be good at refereeing. If you rarely made mistakes, you could brush off the complaints of parents or coaches as simply sour grapes for a game turned against their cheering interests. I eventually built up a reputation as a solid and fair referee. This, of course, helped me when I called Joanna's kick a goal. Because no one had ever witnessed me make an egregiously bad call before, there could be room for simple error on the viewer's part.

Joanna had graduated from the rec rolls and was playing at the more competitive travel level, and Douglass had gone with her, guiding her and her teammates in a series of successful fall and spring campaigns. It wasn't unusual for me to draw one of their games, but for the sake of appearance and propriety, Douglass and I were careful not to shoot the shit before or after.

I can't pretend to know the full story, and I know better than anyone to cast aspersions, but the broad strokes of the Benson family tragedy as I understood them went like this: Douglass, who worked in a law firm, had an affair with a young new hire fresh out of law school. He decided he was in love with her and so told Joanna's mother as much, taking full

responsibility, apologizing profusely, shedding many tears over the whole thing, but in the end deciding that the abominable phrase, "the heart wants what the heart wants" was the truest phrase ever uttered. In short, he could "do the right thing" and forget about his new love and save his family, but with that muscle pounding around in his chest telling him otherwise; with his brain flooding his system with endorphin-clouded visions; with every square centimeter of himself bending toward *her*, well, the only honest thing to do was be with her.

Much of this I'm guessing, of course. I add it only because Douglass always struck me as a decent and thoughtful guy and it's how I can only thank whatever divine intervention or alignment of the planets or stars or simple dumb luck that when my own affair ended, it did so without explosives—no one ever found out and my family stayed intact (though the fear always stayed with me that somehow it would all come out, even as it receded ever further into the past). Douglass, the poor bastard, realized his folly only after the young woman, all of twenty-three, decided that the novelty and attraction of an older man had worn off, and she moved to Colorado with a guy her own age.

From the outside, Douglass was either a fool or a selfish pig who got exactly what he deserved. But, as I said, I was more sympathetic, and not just because I had my own guilt to assuage. I imagined Douglass steeped in that effervescent giddiness of finding yourself, at middle age, hopelessly in love with someone who promised to long outlive you. You do all that silly teenaged stuff—discovering meaning in every song on the radio, seeing signs in the stars, greeting sunny days as if they were created just for the two of you, and rainy days as places of refuge and safe haven buried in her fruit-smelling hair. It was everything you ever imagined and suddenly all those stupid movies made sense to you. You were a kid again: what better gift is there for a guy in his 40s? And yet you also had adult stability: a home, a job, a car. You didn't tiptoe your way through each day, unaware that true love, love that feels like this, happens only once in a lifetime at best, and then retreat to your bedroom in a house other people owned, surrounded by sweat socks and despair.

And then it was over. And here is where Douglass and I parted ways. My affair ended; I mourned, then came to understand that I was mourning something I never should have possessed in the first place. And then came the clichéd inevitability: you turn the attention and effort you used to expend on her inward, putting it back in your own home where it should have been all along, where it should have never left, where you finally manned up and lived out the commitment and promise you made two decades earlier. Douglass's dalliance ended, too, but he wound up in a shitty apartment with thin walls, within striking distance of his old home, trying to repair a hopelessly fractured relationship with his daughter.

I knew where Douglass used to live. I once had occasion to drop off pinnies at his front door for his team's tryouts. I didn't knock, just put them behind the screen door and left. It was a lovely home—small, cozy, with a sloping roof and a yard full of trees. The sort of home that screamed of that nebulous "good life," a well-kept place that made you feel welcome, that said that you'd reached the goal your grandparents came to this country to realize. He lived on a dead-end street, so unless his house or one of his neighbors was your destination, you'd never pass it otherwise. But it was easy to get to, just a few streets outside of my usual route. When I exited the interstate, it dumped me on a lovely leafy road that took me, in just a few more miles, to my own home. Enormous century-old houses lined this road, each unique and solid: stucco, plaster, slate, stone. These were the old summer homes of wealthy Baltimoreans fleeing the city heat in the days before air conditioning.

When you exit the highway, the first home you pass has an attic room, clearly visible from the street. It has Christmas lights strung up and cross-hatch windows with miniature wooden shutters and an air of such lovely isolation. I imagine it's precisely the sort of place Emily Dickinson would have holed up. The thought of living in that house in reality, so close to the noise and pollution of the interstate, seemed awful to me. But I did want that attic room. I wanted to take it and jam it into my own house and retreat to it, with its mood lighting and air of creative industry. I wanted a return to the womb, to come home from work exhausted on a rainy and cold day, slip into warm dry clothes, and go to that room, to feel safe and secure in a place where none of the infections of the cruel world could touch me.

I don't know what the inside of Douglass's house was like, but from the one time I was there on the outside, I imagined it much like that attic: a refuge.

I ran into Joanna and Douglass once, and then Joanna, by herself, in the years after the break-up. The day they were together was in December, close to Christmas, and a snowstorm had been predicted. I was in Home Depot buying an overpriced shovel. As I chose one from the rack, I saw Douglass and Joanna standing next to a pile of plastic sledding saucers. The saucers had been picked through pretty well; several of them lay splayed on the floor. Douglass picked them up, one after another, and showed them to Joanna—she would have been fifteen at this time—and to each one she gave a barely perceptible shake of her head, like a baseball pitcher refusing a catcher's signs. Her arms lay crossed against her chest and her eyes were glassy and red. Douglass didn't give up; he kept going through the pile until he'd exhausted them all. If not for his affair, this would have been a heartwarming scene: father and young daughter, on the cusp of womanhood, but still interested in sledding with dear old dad. But now it was a pitiful play, a father's attempt at normal when the new normal had thoroughly subsumed what once was, and no amount of pretending otherwise would ever change that. Indeed, it made it worse.

I walked away with my shovel and did not look back. But I could guess: they never did buy a saucer that day. They never did go sledding together again.

I saw Joanna again many months later. I had refereed four matches on a hot Saturday in late summer and stepped into the local Carvel still in my gear (a thing I usually avoided: there's guaranteed to be at least one idiot who, upon seeing my referee's uniform, will ask me if I need help to the counter since, you know, I obviously can't see). But I was drained and didn't feel like changing. It was one of those sultry summer evenings where even after the sun went down, the air retained a dewy, suffocating cloak. The doors to the Carvel were open to the night, exhaling a frigid gust from the AC and a cloying fluorescence from the overhead lights.

Joanna was working behind the counter. There was a long line, and I was grateful for it because it gave me a place to make myself invisible, for I was afraid she'd see me. And I didn't want her to. I didn't want to pretend that we didn't know each other, that I didn't know what had happened to her family. But as it turned out, she never turned around. Instead, she focused on filling cones, executing her charge like it was some kind of funereal ritual: hear order, grab cone, pull lever. She had a look of longing on her face, of deep sadness, even despair, watching vacantly as the dispenser discharged its gelatinous payload into a cylindrical swirl. As she watched ropes of ice cream fill each cone, Joanna had the look of a middle-aged adult stuck in lower management in some soulless office, waking one day to find that the job taken out of college as a temporary hedge against crushing loans had now lasted twenty years—a searing *Is this it*? look that should have been impossible for any American teenager to even imitate, no less possess. When it was my turn I ordered quickly and then turned my back. I didn't want Joanna to see me seeing her. I paid, dropped a dollar in the tip jar, and scrammed to battle the sultry night

for the consistency of my ice cream, eventually losing it to drips across my fist, sodden brown napkins, and ultimately, a trash can. As it turned out, I didn't have much of an appetite for it anyway.

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Fortunately, that look on Joanna's face was not the same one she wore at the soccer game. The intensity was still there, but it was of a wholly different variety. She was a solid player with good ball skills and excellent field vision. But she was quiet, and on a few occasions Douglass had to remind her to communicate, to alert teammates to attacking defenders or open space. Despite the instructions, she remained reticent. Was it obstinacy, an outgrowth of her natural personality? I couldn't know. And in any case, I needed to concentrate on the task at hand. I had a game to referee and focusing all my attention on one kid, and her father, and—I wondered if one of the women on the sidelines was Joanna's mother. I realized I had no idea what she looked like—focusing my attention anywhere else but between the lines constituted a dereliction of duty. So I did my job, and I did it well. Until the end, that is.

There were no complaints at all during the game, which was sixty minutes plus thirty minutes of sudden-death overtime of peerless refereeing. Had the game ended then, in its 0-0 tie, the teams would have been declared co-champions. But I kept my whistle out of my mouth as I noted my watch tick down. One of Joanna's teammates sent a ball toward the eighteen-yard line. This is where a referee's discretion comes in. We were at zero—no time left. I could have called it then, but the default is usually to let any potential scoring chance play out and then blow the whistle afterward. So I let it run, and in my subconscious I'm certain much of that had to do with the fact that it was Joanna receiving the ball. I glanced at the sideline and saw Douglass rising from the bench, straining his neck. I turned back to see Joanna rocket the shot toward the far post—a real beauty. The goalkeeper made a terrific diving save, just getting three fingers on the ball and pushing it toward the post, where it bounced, came back toward the goal line, and then got scooped up into the keeper's arms. Clearly it had not crossed the line.

But I called it a goal.

The general reaction was what one might expect in the face of an unexpected tragedy: shock initially, everyone just stuck in place, processing, trying to come to grips with the distance between what they saw and what was actually happening. Then, slowly, the collective realization, swelling into quiet acquiescence on one side, vociferous anger on the other.

There was the usual, "Are you kidding?" and "No way," and a few along the lines of, "You fucking suck! That was the worst call I've ever seen."

But I ignored them. Instead, I kept my gaze on Joanna and Douglass. And it was in watching them that I understood my folly. When Joanna's teammates realized they had just won, they surrounded her, offering congratulations and hugging each other. But it was clearly subdued compared to what should have been a celebration in the same circumstances; they had just been crowned league champions, scoring a goal in the literal last second after two sudden-death overtime periods. It was the most dramatic sporting scenario imaginable. And yet there was a tentative look about them, as if they believed the win might be snatched away or called a practical joke.

I didn't care. It was Joanna I was interested in.

I wanted to see her smile. It occurred to me that I'd never seen her smile. I wanted her to be happy. I wanted her to feel and project the same joy I had so many times seen on my own daughter's face, the face of a kid who was a kid, who didn't have a chunk of her childhood ripped away from her in the murky depths of her parents' dissolution.

But Joanna didn't smile. There was no celebration. Instead, she extricated herself from her teammates and went over to console her opponents, several of whom were lying on the ground with their hands over their eyes.

I looked over at Douglass and we caught eyes. I nodded at him, imperceptibly, a nod that I hoped conveyed congratulations, not complicity. Either way, he simply looked embarrassed and turned away.

More jeering came into focus now, and I knew that things could, and probably would, turn ugly. So I hustled off to the sideline, grabbed my bag, and headed to my car. As I threw my stuff into the backseat, a guy who was hitching up his pants and who looked like he was digesting a cannonball, got within two feet of me, spat on the ground, and asked, "The hell is wrong with you? How much that team pay you, huh, boy?"

"Excuse me," I muttered, while the guy's wife tried in vain to drag him away.

He was still standing in his spot as I pulled away, which meant I had little choice but to almost hit him as I backed out. That was precisely his plan, obviously, as he stood rooted on the edge of the yellow parking line. This allowed him to take further offense and delivered confirmation that I was a complete ass. He removed his ballcap and chucked it at me as I drove off. Through my rear view, I could see its canary yellow color, lying like a dead bird on the back of my car. And I could still see him, too, fuming and stamping his feet and then screaming all the curses and punishments I deserved, things about "rotting in hell" and "eating my own shit." As I pulled out on to the street, I caught one last glimpse of the field. Parents and players congregated on the sidelines as if unable, still, to compute what they had just seen.

I couldn't really blame them.

Just before my exit, traffic thickened and then ground to a virtual standstill. Twenty minutes later, having gone maybe half a mile, I crawled past one of those "Your Speed" electronic signs with the mocking rejoinder: "7 mph." I took advantage of the stasis and removed my uniform as I drove, leaving only my undershirt and shorts. I wouldn't ref anymore. Not ever again.

I finally got off the highway and passed the house with the Dickinson attic room. I still wanted it; that hadn't changed. We all need a place to go home to.

Then, for the second time in my life, I turned down the one-way street where Douglass used to live and where, I assumed, Joanna and her mother still did. I crawled along, looking at each house I passed until I hit the cul-de-sac. I turned around; somehow I'd missed it. So I went back, then turned around and did it again. And each time it was the same: nothing was familiar to me. Then I wasn't sure if I had the right street. I wasn't even sure, if I'm honest, that I'd ever even really been there or what I was hoping to find this time. Maybe it was someone else I'd dropped off my gear to and I'd told myself it was Douglass. I couldn't remember anymore.

I suppose in the end it didn't matter. My own home wasn't far away, and I was headed there.

I pulled into my driveway a few minutes later and turned off the engine. I sat for a moment, then turned the key and got out. I slid my key in the back door.

It was foolish to think I could help mend a family that, in the end, I knew little about and had no business trying to help anyway. And it hadn't done a thing for me, either. I had no sense of a good deed executed, of a lifting weight. Nothing had changed, except for the fact that when I entered my house, I realized that I was alone.