

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 scrambled 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.

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.