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INSIDE PITCH

BY KRISTIN KRONSTAIN

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In the evenings, my husband, Jack, would stand just outside the backdoor and stare at our yard. Some days it was only for a few minutes, some days an hour. He'd pull on his Pittsburgh Pirates hat and jacket when the warm breeze waned and stand with his hands on his hips, absorbed by something he saw. The rusting swing set. A shriveling maple. The yard dipping into a valley and back up the slope to a line of pine trees. A memory. A disappointment. I could only guess what held his gaze.

His faithfulness to standing outside unnerved me at times. I never joined him. He never asked me to. I never said anything to him until he came inside again. But it was all I could do during those few minutes every day not to put my arms around him. I used to focus my attention on the kids and their homework. But they'd all moved out, so then I turned to the dishes for a distraction. I could see him from the sink, his silhouette darkening with the sinking of the sun. His pants no longer controlled his bulging belly. He claimed it was my brownies that did it. I denied it.

I never asked him what he thought about as he stood.

Jack could throw a ninety-mile an hour fastball when we were in college. Local reporters, sports enthusiasts, and inadequately clad girls followed two steps behind him most days. I was his lab partner in astronomy. He would flicker a gracious smile when he saw me, but he only saw me in class. I saw him a dozen times a week.

"Who do you play today?" I asked one morning as we plotted moon craters.

He shrugged. "Doesn't matter. I'll throw strikes at every one of the them."

My eyes narrowed. "Are you insecure about most things in your life or just baseball?"

Jack laughed, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "Kate, I'm not as full of it as you might think. If someone happens to get a hit off me, the team will take care of it. It just doesn't happen all that often."

"So why aren't you at some huge university if you're that good? Or playing professionally?" I asked, partially from curiosity, partially wanting to avoid working in an awkward silence. "What are you doing at a college with 4,000 students?"

He shrugged. "I probably will go pro one day, but my dad wanted me to go to college first. Both of my parents went here. My sister went here. I guess it was just always assumed I would go here. As long as I can play baseball, I'm happy." That day, not one man on the opposing team got to first base off Jack's pitching.

During the next class, I mentioned the game to him.

His face exploded with pride. "Did you see that last batter? He was shaking so bad he was close to tears."

"I didn't watch the game," I said, opening my notebook.

"You didn't come?" he asked, surprised. "I thought you always came to the games."

I looked at him, just as surprised. "Of course not. I had a paper to write for my Lit class. Why would you think I'd come?"

He smiled, his only means of subterfuge. "Oh, I saw you wearing a Yankees t-shirt once. I thought you were the type to cheer for me when I'm on the mound."

I glared at him, ignoring those crinkles around his eyes. Did he think I was one of the mindless skirts that followed him across campus? Or did he think that I was trying to wedge myself into his world out of a desperate need for social affirmation? Either way, he had not only touched a nerve, he'd sawed through it.

After class, his teammates were waiting for him, their ringleader, in the hall. I walked back to my dorm alone and read an assignment on Byzantine theology.

In our next lab, as I worked out a math problem, Jack tapped his pen on the table to the beat of a song in his head. "So, I saw you with Steven Jacobs the other day. Something there?"

I glanced up. Steve was a halfback on the football team. "No."

Jack nodded and leaned his chair back on two legs. "Just screwing him, huh?"

I continued to write out the equation. "I'm helping him with a paper."

"You had to shoot him down though, right?" Jack said with a chuckle.

I didn't laugh. "I'm pretty sure I'm not his type."

He thought about this for a moment. "You have something against dating athletes?"

I looked at him. His deep brown eyes seemed to be softer than usual. I cleared my throat. "I haven't really thought about it like that."

"Well, you dated Adam Davis, didn't you?" he pressed, referring to the right fielder on his team. "Before he started dating Pam."

"I don't think I'm really comfortable talking about this with you," I said tucking my hair behind my ear. Having wisdom teeth pulled was more comfortable than this.

Jack nodded again and rocked in his chair, finally easing up on his interrogation.

“So, what did you get for the second question?”

I heard on the campus radio station a week later that Jack had had a bad inning that cost the team the game. A fluke, of course, claimed the D.J., but four runs in one inning had been the start of a downhill spiral. They lost three to ten.

One Friday morning lab, I could feel him watching me. I ignored him for a while, but, obviously, he had something he wanted to say. He must not have wanted to initiate of conversation. I finally had to ask, if only to get him to stop staring.

“What?”

“I can’t figure you out,” he said nonchalantly.

At first, I wasn’t a hundred percent sure that he was talking about me. He was.

“What’s to figure out?” I asked.

“Well,” he began as if he was still working on this theory. “You don’t seem to like baseball, but I get the feeling you know the game really well.”

“What tipped you off?” I asked, forcing indifference into my voice.

He smiled. “Intuition.”

I could feel him watching me again. He was waiting for me to respond. I didn’t know what to do. I pulled out my star chart and fingered the edge of it. “My dad used to take my brothers and me to Yankees games when we were younger.”

Jack hesitated. “But... you don’t go now?”

“No.”

He paused again as he eyed me, then asked, “How come?”

“He’s not around anymore.”

It was obvious Jack tried to resist the urge to press, but failed. “Did he die?” he asked.

Was I really going to admit this to him of all people? “He left.”

Pity filled his eyes, which were not crinkling now. This was the reason I loathed telling people about my dad. Sympathetic eyes.

Jack breathed out. “How old were you?”

“Twelve,” I said with a shrug. “But I’m over it.”

He nodded. “My parents split up when I was six,” he offered.

I looked away and back to my work, cursing myself for admitting anything. Jack either didn’t notice my unease or pretended not to.

“What about Adam?”

I hated hearing his name. “What about him?”

“You know,” Jack said, now seeming hesitant. “He played baseball. That didn’t

bother you? I mean, having those feelings about your dad and all.”

“Not at the time,” I said carefully.

“Then what happened?”

He was watching me intently. There was no laughter in his eyes. I told myself he was simply curious. I fidgeted with my pencil. What I really wanted to do was snap it in half. “We were fine and then it was over. That’s all.”

“Come on, there had to be a reason.”

“I don’t really feel like talking about it.”

He rolled his eyes. “Come on, Kate, this is just a friendly discussion. Don’t get so defensive about everything all the-”

“Fine,” I said interrupting him. “He was sleeping with Pam behind my back. Ok?”

Jack was silent. My face grew hot as I went back to work.

As I was putting my stuff away to leave after class, Jack turned to me. I zipped my bag and pretended not to notice, heading for the door.

He hurried to catch up with me. “Wait a second, Kate.”

The hall was empty, aside from a skinny kid hanging flyers about a Chemistry Club meeting. We had been the last ones out of the classroom. No one was waiting for him today. Who followed an athlete who was having a streak of mediocrity?

“Do you think you could help me study for the final?” he asked.

I tried not to admit that he was humbling himself to request this of me. I wanted to believe that, in his eyes, I was the only one who would still be willing to cast a drop of attention his way, despite his less than decent pitching of late. A last resort. Someone who was as miserable as he was to commiserate with. Or complain to.

I shook my head. “I don’t think I’ll have time for anything like that.”

He continued to walk in step with me. “How about we have lunch and you can think about it? I’ll remind you of how pathetic my astronomy skills are and maybe then you’ll take pity on me.”

I refused to meet his eyes. I couldn’t. Not after everything that I had told him. My dad. Adam. “No lunch, but I’ll think about helping you study, ok?”

I did not intend to study with him.

His smile changed. It didn’t seem gracious this time; it seemed, well... full of gratitude. The crinkles looked to be directed toward me. “Great, thanks.”

The next game, Jack was pulled after walking three straight batters. Within a few more games, Jack had lost his starting position and spent more time than anyone on the bench. He became more subdued because of it. I figured that his inflated sense of self worth had finally popped.

By the end of the semester, Jack’s mitigated nature bothered me more than his

previous banter. I would look away and pretend not to see him as he walked in the opposite direction through the hall. He said hi when he saw me. I avoided him when I could.

I took my studying to the quad for the first afternoon of warm weather. I spread out a blanket and opened my astronomy book. I could see a bunch of Jack's baseball buddies hitting on a girl in front of the student center. Jack was standing with Adam a few feet away from them. I shuddered, wondering what Adam was telling Jack about me. Jack had to have told him about my meltdown in class. He and Adam were probably having a good laugh about it.

"Kate was so wrapped up in Tolstoy that she had no idea I was nailing Pam," Adam was probably saying

"How could anyone be that obtuse?" Jack would respond.

Well, neither of them would say "obtuse." "Oblivious," maybe. Or "naïve."

I attempted to focus on my reading to drown out their voices, in reality and in my head. Just as the words began to blur from boredom, I heard my name.

"Hey, Kate. Guess what." Jack jogged over and sat down next to me.

I looked at his friends. They were watching him. Adam had disappeared.

"What?"

"I'm going to play tomorrow. Even though I've been sucking hard core, Coach Lewis said he's taking a leap of faith and starting me."

I gave him an apathetic smile. "How exciting for you." But, the thing was, he really didn't seem all that excited.

"Jack!" It was the third baseman, Nate. He sauntered over. "We're talking about hitting a couple bars tonight. You in?"

Jack shielded his eyes from the sun. "Nah, I'll catch up with you guys at the game tomorrow."

Nate glanced at me. Right. Later." He headed back across the quad.

I examined Jack's face. He looked distracted. "You don't want to go?" I asked.

"I don't like drinking the night before a game," he explained.

Seemed logical.

Jack pulled a blade of grass out by the roots. "But hey, I was just wondering if you would come tomorrow and watch."

"I have a lot to do-"

"Don't stay away because of Adam," Jack said. "He won't even be there. He was just telling me he broke his finger. I promise, you won't have to see him."

For years, I would wonder if it had been the astonishment of his straightforwardness or a flicker of compassion that triggered my response.

I shrugged. "Well, it's not that. But I guess I could come. For part of the game anyway."

There was that smile. "Cool."

The next morning, I put on jeans and a blue button-down shirt. Then I changed into a t-shirt. Then I decided to go with a simple black tank top.

I sat in the middle of the stands, slightly apart from the crowd. As the team warmed up, I saw Jack look my way. I raised my hand in the tiniest of waves. He grinned back. Crinkling.

The umpire lumbered to his place behind the plate and the players took their positions. Jack leaned forward slightly and looked across the plate. It seemed to me that he was choosing which of the fingers in the catcher's glove to aim for.

Strike.

The catcher threw the ball back.

Strike. Strike.

The batter never even swung. He trotted dejectedly back to the bench and his replacement trudged to the box.

As the next batter got settled, I could have sworn I saw Jack glimpse my way. He wiped the sweat off his upper lip and stared down the batter. But then he glanced back to me. I must have been hallucinating in the pounding sun. Jack let out a breath and held the ball to his chest. He looked down at the ground and shuffled his feet. What was he waiting for?

Ball.

Ball? I blinked as if to clear the mistake from my head. No mistake. The pitch was inside. On the next throw, the batter swung feverishly. He lobbed the ball over the shortstop's head, making it easily to first base. By the end of the inning, Jack had allowed a home run, three singles, and two triples. It was agonizing. The tension that had been building in my neck eased slightly as Jack finally trailed off the field. He was benched. The relief pitcher saved the game.

Jack came up to the fence in front of me as the players left the field. I climbed over the bleachers and down to him. I averted my eyes timidly. His cleats didn't have a scuff or mark on them.

"Did it look as bad to you as it felt to me?" he asked solemnly, shading his eyes from the sun.

I shrugged. "Probably could have been worse."

"How?"

"You could have taken a line drive to the face," I said.

He laughed. "Who knows? A dent to the forehead may be an improvement." He pulled his hat off and put it back on again. "So, have you thought any more about studying with me?"

I smiled at him. "I think I finally have enough pity for you to want to help."

He laughed again and glanced at his teammates still congregated around the relief pitcher.

“Jack, come on!” Nate called, gesturing toward the locker room door.

Jack turned back to me. “How about tonight?”

After graduating college, Jack never picked up a baseball again.

Five years after we were married, we could finally afford a house. The backyard could have been made into a football, or better yet, a baseball field, but we never did much to it. We planted a few bushes and maples. Our petunias never lasted more than a few weeks before they withered. I’d never had much of a green thumb and Jack never seemed to care much about gardening. He simply stared at the yard.

I would watch him from the dining room window when I wasn’t trying to distract myself with dishes. I would pull back the sheer curtain and lean my head on the glass, thinking about him. With each passing year, my thoughts became more frenetic. What was he thinking about? The possible answer scared me more than that question.

Long after our kids moved out and had kids of their own, long after the darkness of Jack’s hair dissolved and the skin under his chin began to sag, he stopped going outside at night. Instead, he sat in the armchair in the family room and watched me read. After a while, he’d turn on the TV. Sometimes we would talk.

After a few weeks, I was more shaken by him not going outside than I had been when he did. He stared at the TV. I stared at him.

“You don’t want to go outside?” I asked hesitantly.

He shrugged. “It just doesn’t matter anymore.”

“What doesn’t matter?”

His eyes flicked quickly from the TV, to me, and then back to the TV. “You know, the things I had always wanted, but never tried to get.”

This was the first time I had heard anything like this from him. I was taken aback. “You’re not happy with your life? Why?”

He looked agitated. “Well, you know. In college, I gave up a lot. But I’ve realized that the life I’ve had was worth it.”

He picked up the TV remote and began flipping through the channels, closing the subject.

I was baffled. What had he given up? We didn’t get married until well after college, so it wasn’t his independence. Kids were well after that. The only thing that really had changed about him was that he had stopped playing baseball. He played in college, but then he focused on his job after that. Sure, he had been good enough to play professionally, but he chose not to. He *had* been good enough. He lost his talent. Well, lost may be the wrong word. A person couldn’t just lose a talent. He started being benched around the time we started dating. I had only gone to the one game. After that, he stopped even talking about

baseball. But he had loved playing so much.

I gasped silently. Had he given up baseball because of me? Did he think that the only way for me to open up to him, to stop looking down on him, was to abandon the sport he loved because of the negative connotation it had for me?

My hands shook. My knees trembled. I put down my book and stood. I went over to him and gingerly knelt in front of his chair. He took my hand.

“Jack,” I breathed. “Did you-”

He pulled me slowly to my feet and onto his lap, kissing my shoulder. He scratched his throat and sighed with the crinkled smile I claimed as mine. “Kate, I love you. Let’s leave it at that.”

Kristin Kronstain graduated from Westminster College in New Wilmington, PA, with a BA in history. Though Russian history is her primary area of interest, she also enjoys reading and writing short stories. Her favorite writers include Lorrie Moore and Oscar Wilde. Currently, she works as the assistant to the executive pastor of Orchard Hill Church in Wexford, PA, but she has plans to return to school for her master’s.

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