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THE SUICIDE WATCH

BY JOEL JAMES DAVIS

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Pepper Kyler has a four-inch scar running from the bottom of his right nostril up across the crooked nose to the core of his forehead. His little brother witnessed the seemingly routine play that resulted in the thin, meandering purple line.

Harry Ransfeldt was attempting his twenty-sixth stolen base of the season, which would have tied a Margin County record for the fifteen-year-olds division, when he slid into second base and shoved his metal-cleated size ten left shoe across Pepper's already homely triangular face. Amidst the explosion of dust, Harry was called out by Pepper's older brother Danny, a scrawny infield umpire who three times a week donned the compulsory short-sleeved powder-blue oxford shirt and gray polyester pants for payment of two bucks and a burnt dog and flat Coke per game. This routine official act caused the Reds' parents, players, and coaches to erupt in an outburst complete with profanity, stiff middle fingers, epithets of vision-impairment, and plans to eradicate the sixteen-year-old neophyte.

Pepper was dragged off to the emergency room for stitches while four delirious parents (Harry's inebriated policeman father being one) and an assistant coach were tossed from the game by plate umpire Stotz Baumgartner, the local exterminator and full-time adult umpire. Stotz lived behind the collection of three fields and measly concession stand in a cramped, air-conditioned bubble-shaped trailer. He resided like a rain cloud behind the plate, storming thunderous ball and strike calls through the woven rusty tines of the chicken wire and telephone pole backstop. His Marine Corps-conditioned, v-shaped frame (complete with dirty blonde crew cut, Pythagorean-precision trimmed moustache, and baseball-sized biceps) transitioned from a contorted, crouching recoil position to a stretched out 'k' shape when he announced the indisputable verdict of every pitch. He ejected all disruptive persons with authority and a *Drop and gimme twenty, you maggots!* zeal. Spit flew from his wire mask when such directives were administered.

Danny was right on top of the play; therefore, one can assume that the high school dropout called it the way he saw it. He publicly hated his much bigger little brother, so an intentional call in Pepper's favor seemed unlikely. Kenny Hale, the Blues' southpaw closer on the mound at the time this infamous attempted theft of second base was endeavored, pitched from the stretch. His deceptive spin toward first and then home didn't allow Harry any sort of jump at all. Pepper was grinning and waiting with gloved ball resting in front of the sullied bag when Harry arrived. If Pepper hadn't been grinning and hadn't dated Harry's ex-girlfriend two days after their much-ballyhooed breakup, the secondhand leather shoe attached to his pinstriped pipe cleaner leg might not have found its way into the August air and, eventually, Pepper's smirking mug. But he *did*, and *it did*. So it goes without much more pointing out that Bucky Kennel's nineteen-year-old record stood, and Harry

cemented his future as the lead overnight stock clerk at the Army and Navy store.

Pepper's little brother knew Harry would attempt the steal. Harry was starved for a share of the record, and CJ Kyler saw opposing coach Jones slide his right hand down his amputated and burn-scarred left arm to its truncated stub, put his index finger and thumb on the tip of his red bill, and then touch his hand to mid-thigh and chest. All of that, in its successive choreographed chronology, secretly called for a distracting swing by batter Manny Rodriguez and a steal from Harry. CJ deciphered the arcane body language and sent its meaning out to catcher Paddy Hendricks via an equally impressive set of signs: a tug on his pristine blue bill, a touch to his freckled nose, and a rapid double tap on the soiled frame of his wheelchair. Paddy, in turn, flicked four quick fingers followed by a clenched fist to Kenny's sole attention (calling for a pitchout) which he received standing up and then fired a 127 feet, 3 ¾ inch rope to Pepper's Dave Conception signature Rawlings glove with black shoestrings holding the fingers together. All of this effort from the four boys worked exactly as was practiced every Tuesday and Thursday evening from six till eight.

And the rest (as they still say in Margin County, and everywhere else in the world for that matter) is history.

The game-ending, division-winning suicide squeeze worked the same way. Coach Hendricks, Paddy's Uncle, practiced such situational plays regularly. He was a porky, red-faced man who about 120 pounds and sixteen years before played single-A ball for the California Angels. His batting average and fielding percentage were anemic enough to make him quit ball to sell upright vacuum cleaners door-to-door. Coach H employed CJ's affinity for statistics as part of his methodology of *playing the percentages*. CJ was always at the ready with his stopwatch, which had replaced the less-effective *one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi* time keeping system. He carefully cataloged the ninety-foot base-to-base speed of each player. This paramount statistic provided the elliptical Coach H with whom to use in hit and runs, steals, and the anomalous suicide squeeze play. Nothing was done without CJ's input and, essentially, his approval. The pudgy ten-year-old redhead was the official team scorer, equipment manager, statistician, assistant coach, and league-leading sign stealer. He knew that a cupped hand near the crotch wasn't necessarily an adjustment of the errant male organ but perhaps a well-practiced signal to bunt, steal, take, or swing away. It was CJ's responsibility to figure out what each opposing team's third base coach was telling his players with every quickened palsy-like touch of his person.

Midway through the twenty-three game season CJ was headed down the warped L-shaped plywood ramp that led from his new mother's back door to the grass when he spotted a fifty-cent piece deep in the jungle of the uncircumcised, dandelion-infested lawn. He had been considering whether Pete Lilly, his team's speedy shortstop with flaky psoriasis and thick glasses, could steal third on Saturday's opponent, the Browns, if Sandy Thigpen was catching. (Thigs led the league in two categories: throwing runners out and facial hair.) CJ called upon Joseph, one of the many ill-mannered neighbor kids, to extract the filthy bullion. The sticky toddler complied and resumed eating that which was recently pulled from inside his stalactite-infested pug nose. CJ considered returning the recovered prize to the strange woman as she flitted about the fractured house, unfocused on whatever it was she was attempting to accomplish. He balked at sharing his news, adopting the decision to not have a conversation with her about his modest financial harvest.

Spreading a smile across his face, he secured the money in the metal shop project attached to the outside frame of his vehicle. The graffiti-stricken aluminum box held important things: scorekeeping pencils, spearmint gum, Popsicle sticks for cleaning muddied spikes, mis-matched dice, the occasional coin, and a three-year-old wallet-sized photograph of himself with his two brothers and their dead parents (all five dressed in coordinating red and white Christmas outfits and obese

smiles).

"I'm going to Dillow's," he spat into the stale air.

Mrs. Ardith Dillow held a garage sale every year at that time. It was his turn to see one of her sales that was always good for trinkets and inexpensive debris.

"Fine, boy. But do not go to Thatcher's!" the woman snapped.

It was oft-discussed community knowledge that Mr. Thatcher died mysteriously a couple years prior. Stories circulated that he caught his wife with umpire Stotz Baumgartner and immediately went into the woods with his Ithaca 12-gauge and voiced his opinion on infidelity all over the bark of a sixty-year-old oak tree.

"I won't!" CJ responded, stretching out the middle 'o' part for two or three seconds, well aware of house rules on visiting crazy suicidal widows for discounts on generic household sundries. He maneuvered his chair toward Mrs. Dillow's house on the adjacent dead end street.

"Got any watches?" he said to her immediately upon his arrival.

"Stopwatches," he added.

She replied with a non-expressive shake of her over-sized head bald from cancer treatments. "Widow Thatcher does, though. Saw it last night when I looked through her junk," she said in her splintered voice.

CJ thanked her and wheeled down the sidewalk where the brittle brown of the widow's lawn screamed for visitors. His curly tubes of hair bounced with each transition from one displaced square of the sidewalk to the next. Few people ever went to her sale, but she continued to have her sale each year to coincide with Mrs. Dillow's. He gulped hard and rolled closer to her decimated yellow box of a house. (Stotz's mangled Jeep wasn't in the driveway like people said it used to be all the time.) The dead man's wife leaned against the weathered garage doorframe alone smoking a stubby, flaring cigarette, her gaunt body draped with wrinkled clothes. *A stopwatch sure'd help the team*, he justified to himself as he rolled the large gray wheels toward her.

He wanted to make the shopping process quick: wheel in, spot the watch, pay the half-dollar, and get the hell out even faster without conversation or information about how a deer slug enters through the inside of the throat and explodes out the back of the head bringing with it everything inside including, probably, some regret.

He continued on the uneven concrete until reaching her stone driveway. Weeds and grass covered much of it; random sawhorses combined with hollow doors forming tables to hold the dead man's stuff covered the rest.

"Aren't you one of the Kyler boys?" she asked through a plume of expelled cigarette exhaust. CJ's chest careened against the inside of his dirty blue T-shirt as he looked for the rumored watch. "Uh huh. Carlton. Ain't you the widow?"

The tiny woman's caramel smile shone through the haze of smoke. She offered a laugh. "I am," she said, sucking on the brown cigarette stump.

CJ was beginning a smile when his wheelchair caught on a large mirror as he passed it, tipping over its image of a desperate lady contained by a giant gray circle, converting it to many smaller, unequal pieces.

"Oh man, I'm sorry lady."

He knew what came next when his wheelchair was involved. He stopped his search for the watch and waited for the *Cripple!* or *That damn chair!* comment. *Why do you people always have to make such a scene with every thing you do?* he expected.

"Oh my God! Are you all right, Carlton?" the dead man's wife asked.

"I'm fine, ma'am. But I broke your nice mirror," CJ said, prepared to surrender his fifty-cent piece as restitution.

"That old thing? That's nothin'. That was Johnny's. My husband's. He used it to make sure his face camouflage was just right before he'd go into the woods hunting. I was just tryin' to get rid of it, and you did it for me." She flicked her spent stub end over end into the grassy stones. "So, thank you, Carlton."

His confusion gave birth to an overweight smile. "You're not angry?" He knew she wasn't.

"Oh, no. I'm quite okay with it, actually. Were you lookin' for something, Carlton? You seem to be lookin' for a certain thing. I don't have any baseball cards, I'm sorry to say."

CJ felt unusually comfortable in his wheelchair. "I'm lookin' for a stopwatch, Mrs. Thatcher? Ya got one? I heard ya did."

The dead man's wife smiled at hearing her name. "I do, Carlton. It was Johnny's watch. It's a good one, too." She gathered the round, scratched timepiece from a table of orphaned items: hunting equipment, razors and combs, neckties, and men's size 8 ½ shoes. "It's a good one. It keeps regular time, but it also keeps time for races and stuff. That's probably why you want it, huh?"

CJ explained how he timed the players. She asked why he would have to do that for baseball, smiling at having him explain the strategy involved.

"Sorry about Mr. Thatcher," CJ said, folding a thin rectangle of green spearmint gum lengthwise into his dry mouth. He extended a foiled piece out to her.

"Thank you, Carlton." Surprised, she took the gum from his dirty hand, removed it from its protective cover, stuffed it into her mouth, and nodded in appreciation. She tucked islands of greasy hair behind her ears. "It was an accident, you know," she said, her miniature black eyes pleading with his. He nodded. She continued, "And I'm sorry about your accident. And you being in that chair."

"It ain't so bad," he answered with a smile, exposing his crooked white teeth.

"Johnny liked baseball a lot," she explained, refusing to take any money for the watch.

Mrs. Eloise Thatcher and Carlton John Kyler said goodbye to each other with unfamiliar smiles on their faces.

The hometown Blues took a two-all tie into the bottom half of the ninth after Pepper went to the emergency room in the noisy white van with a whirling red light atop its roof. CJ helped Coach H engineer Pete Lilly's steal of second after he received a base-on-balls on the full count pitch. The next batter, all-star right fielder Ronny Combs, flied out to the warning track in deep center, sacrificing Lilly over to third. Then team captain and RBI leader Nick Justy, the Blues' mammoth first baseman, fouled out to the catcher on a wicked hanging curve. And that's

when CJ poured through his stats scrawled out on faded notebook paper. From the numbers he knew Lilly's speed to home (with a strong jump) was deadly. He knew Tim Henderson, a switch-hitter batting right, could lay a solid drag bunt down the third base line. He knew no one else had tried to marry the two plays yet that season, and the Reds might not expect it.

CJ hunched forward in his chair, the hand-written stats splayed across his lap, dead Johnny Thatcher's stopwatch in his tight left hand, a bite-marked yellow pencil tucked behind each ear. Coach H's bloodshot eyes looked at CJ for affirmation; he then touched his gray stubbled chin, each ear lobe (left then right), and finally his soft, massive right thigh. Lilly took a generous lead off third, crouching with the wiggling fingers of his hand reaching back toward the bag, his cleats twisting on the fading white stripe of lime that led home.

The wispy opposing pitcher toed the rubber, wrapped his index and middle fingers around the bulbous red laces, and kicked his leg high in the air as Lilly broke for home. Six miles away Pepper's face was being stitched up with black thread. And on field two at Margin County Park the suicide was on.

Joel James Davis recently won an Andrew Bergman Scholarship in Creative Writing at Binghamton University, where he studies English and globalization and is a reader for *Harpur Palate*. His senior honors thesis is a collection of forty-one 500-word short stories. A winner of a 2003 Kenneth Miller Literary Prize, he has fiction appearing or forthcoming in *Blood Orange Review*, *Elsewhere*, and *Pindeldyboz*. He lives in upstate New York and is manager of the grunge band *complex 3*.

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