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# GAME NIGHT BY CARRIE HAGEN

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**S**ome fathers yell at their teenage daughters for exposing too much skin. Others expect high SAT scores, or at least admission into their alma maters. Where I grew up, in Levittown, Pennsylvania, most fathers just wanted to see high school diplomas before baby showers. My dad was a little harder to please. He wanted his daughter to play high school football before she graduated.

And so, as the eve of Thanksgiving turned into one of the coldest nights of 1994, I stood in a high school gymnasium with over 100 other girls wearing football jerseys. We faced two sets of doors underneath exit signs at the corners of the gym. On the other side of the doors, across from the football practice field, an enthusiastic crowd awaited our arrival in the high school stadium. Some of my classmates jumped up and down, preparing to run through the doors with pumped fists and angry snarls. Others stood silently, perhaps reviewing their practiced plays. I prayed for deliverance from the hellish incompetence that I was about to display.

The doors opened into a darkness illuminated by bright stadium lights. Girls in the back of the pack cheered and pushed forward, causing a chain reaction of tripping and shoving until everybody spilled outside. I ducked into the wind and ran towards the fans. Parents, boyfriends, brothers and underclassmen clapped when we charged through the gates with excited war cries. Most players bumped chests and slapped hands in the middle of the field. I ran in circles around them, too full of dread to fake enthusiasm, too self-conscious to stand still. A few minutes later, our mix of red and blue jerseys divided into two large circles as each girl surrounded her captains. I huddled with the blue team. Our captains, three successful Varsity athletes, took turns delivering pep talks assembled from the inspirational speeches of *Hoosiers*, *Rudy*, and *A Few Good Men*. My teammates nodded with serious expressions. I crouched to the ground and pulled my jersey over my knees. My eyebrows felt frozen. I had no idea how I was going to stand through a full-length football game or why I agreed to participate in the event I had dreaded since the tenth grade. A final yell from the captains sent our offense running onto the field and the rest of us to the sidelines. Many girls huddled together on the benches or jumped in place around the Gatorade coolers. I walked along the fence that separated the field from the track and looked for my father in the stands. He was, no doubt, one of the many balding, middle-aged men holding a camcorder in front of their faces. I spotted him and stared without waving. Ten years before, I was the one who smiled and cheered as he paced the field.

When I was seven years old, my father coached high school football in West Palm Beach, Florida. I went to his home games often, but not to watch the team. I was more interested in the eight Varsity cheerleaders who encouraged his boys to victory. I memorized the girls' actions from the moment they stepped their saddle shoes onto the track that circled the stadium. I imagined my hips swishing pleated skirts to the left, the right, hypnotizing the crowd with patterned swirls of blue and yellow, yellow and white, white and blue. I pictured myself shaking one pom-pom in front of my waist and the other across the open mouth of the girl next to me, momentarily muffling cheers and the giggles

that teased admirers in the stands. One evening a week, I stood on the field and practiced lifting my legs high into the air. Every Monday, my father let me help him apply the liquid chalk to the sidelines. Together, we walked over the track and through the gate that separated players from spectators. I put my hand next to his steady grip on the tiny plow, and we pushed past the stands on the home side, in front of the north goal that looked into the woods, by the smaller bleachers on the visitors' side, and next to the goalpost adjacent to the lot that led truants to Wendy's. I loved the smell of the freshly-cut field, especially when whiffs of French fries breezed through the humidity. When our duties were finished, Dad took his time gathering leftover equipment from practice. I ran around the empty field, dodging wet stripes with my invisible pom-poms. My father entertained my weekly fantasies, but whenever I mentioned that I wanted to be a real cheerleader, he grimaced.

"Caarriieeeee...." he would say, turning his frown into a failed laugh.

"Don't you like basketball? running? Don't you want to play field hockey one day?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"The uniforms are ugly. And it looks hard."

"Practice makes it easier. You could try."

"Maybe."

Because our father was a coach, my two younger brothers and I spent most of our free time on the school grounds. We had access to all sorts of athletic equipment, but we preferred to play hide-and-go seek around the weight rooms, the locker rooms, the fields and the gym. Dad was determined to let us explore our interests rather than push us into the organized sports that brought him athletic success. So when I realized that most of the cheerleaders on the team could jump from a handstand into a split, I asked my mother, a former college cheerleader, to enroll me in a gymnastics class. She agreed. I don't think she was encouraging my dream as much as she was getting back at my father for insinuating that cheerleading wasn't really a sport. Plus, she was aware that I didn't have her lithe body and probably hoped that an honest instructor would break the bad news to me. Such a speech wasn't necessary. Week after week, while my classmates learned to turn cartwheels on the balance beam, I couldn't walk on it without falling off. The instructors collected my weekly fees and left me to twirl my light blue skirt in front of the mirror. It didn't take too long for me to realize that thin girls controlled the sidelines, and "big-boned" girls played on the field.

I gave up gymnastics one year later, when my father accepted a counseling position and a coaching job at a small college outside of Philadelphia. We moved in the middle of July. Many children lived on our new street, and before the U-Haul was unloaded, their parents forced them to meet the new children. In the upcoming weeks, my two younger brothers and I shied away from their offers of street games, preferring instead to stay inside and watch Nickelodeon. Sensitive to our status as "the new kids," my mother had surprised us with cable television, a luxury that we hadn't had before. In the evenings, we hung from the barren crabapple trees in our backyard and listened to the laughter and the arguments of the neighborhood children. When school started, we slowly joined the pick-up games of soccer, whiffle-ball, and nerf football with our new friends. But to my Father's surprise, we couldn't compete very well with our neighbors. He soon learned that in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, community sports leagues have "Under-5" divisions. Regardless of age, teams practice a few days a week and compete on weekends throughout the year. In Florida, we never learned athletic drills or any game rules playing hide-and-go seek. Dad worried that his "hands-off" philosophy hampered our physical development, so he began enrolling me and my brothers in every league, sports camp, and Capture the Flag game that the neighborhood children attended. If we whined about spending weekends and holidays on the playing field, he asked us if we would rather play hide-and-go-seek or hang from crabapple trees. If we answered "Yes," he bribed our participation with snacks from 7-11. "Plus," he would say as we threw softball gloves, soccer balls and baseball bats into the family minivan, "I just want to make sure that if you want to play in high school, you'll be able to make the team." Our only ally was our mother. She knew how much money our father spent on camps, and she also knew that her children were not disciplined enough to compete with the athletic elite. She tried, in vain, to remind my father of the mortgage and why they both worked two jobs. My father's answer was always the same.

"Dianne ... Dianne! I got a deal."

My father always "got a deal" by enrolling at least two of us in whichever workshop, retreat, or clinic he wanted one of us to go to. Usually, the athletic interests overlapped. Basketball workshops were co-ed, field hockey and soccer camps ran simultaneously, and baseball and softball often shared the same fields.

So when the alarm sounded on the morning of December 26 during my last year of junior high school, I wasn't shocked that my Christmas break was being disturbed. Our alarm clock wasn't a mechanical one that could be silenced by a small button. Every morning, we awoke to my father's chants at the top of the staircase: "Carrie, Carrie, Caaaaarie.....DavidDavidDavid... ..Jooooohhhnnnn, Jooooohhhnnnn." He had a specific tone and rhythm that greeted each of us. I heard the alarm again. On especially sleepy days, level two of the alarm required Dad to knock on the problem child's door before stepping inside, continuing his chants until we made eye contact with him. He tapped on my door and opened it gently.

"Carrie ... " he whispered. "Carrie, Caaaaarie."

"Why are you here?" I knew perfectly well why he was there. "Get out!" My Mom spoke up from the bottom of the staircase. "Bill, stop it. Stop it! What are you doing? It's her break." And then, in a lower tone, "I'm tired of spending college funds on these sports that they hate."

"Dianne, Dianne!" he whispered enthusiastically. "They really like it when they're there. They just need to be pushed a little. Plus, I got a deal."

"I'm not going anywhere, Dad," I mumbled.

"You're going somewhere."

"Aunt Carol's?"

"No."

"Granddad's?"

"No."

"Noooooooooooo! Not during Christmas vacation."

"What do you mean? We talked about this."

"When?"

"Earlier this month."

"What sport?"

"Softball."

"Where?"

"New Jersey."

"Why are David and John coming?"

"They're going too!"

"To softball?"

"No ... Baseball."

"Get it together. Softball or baseball!"

"Well, it's run by a very famous baseball player, and I got a good deal. It's called 'Bill Robinson's

Baseball Clinic".....

"NooooooooOOOOOOOOO"

"But they assured me that softball players can come too."

"I don't want to go!"

Our defiance provoked his sarcasm. "Ohhh, sugar and marshmallows for Carrie. Do you want to stay home and cook cotton candy and jump in the pillows?"

"What the hell are you talking about? Get out."

Thirty minutes later, the tan Dodge minivan backed out of the driveway. I had crawled from bed out of guilt for the family finances, and my brothers were bribed with two treats from 7-11, before and after the clinic, for the rest of the week. One hour later, we arrived at a warehouse outfitted like a second-rate gym complex.

A cold scent of dirty mats and plastic equipment blew through the door as I entered behind my brothers. I scanned the typical workshop setting with my experienced eye. Netting shielded two batting cages on either side of the otherwise barren room. Several tees towards the front door faced the back wall, where spare ball gloves were arranged on the floor. Behind the tees, towards the center of the gym, a coaching staff composed of attractive male college players formed a half circle around Bill Robinson, a veteran of the Pirates, Yankees, and Phillies. Robinson, a handsome black man in his early fifties, smiled under a grey-speckled moustache. His staff spoke quietly as he sized up his new campers. A group of elementary-aged boys slouched between the coaches and the batting cage. They nervously kicked their bats up with their sneakers as parents stood against the wall behind them.

"Dad? Why aren't there any girls here?" I asked.

"They're coming; it's still a little early."

"No, it's not. We're late, remember? That's why you were yelling at John for taking so long in the store."

"That boy needs too much time to choose between Doritos and Cheetos."

"Dad! Where are they?"

"They're coming. Trust me."

"Then where are the female coaches? There are only men here. Did you lie to me?"

"No. They said softball players were welcome."

"Welcome. As in, 'This is a baseball camp for boys. But if you want to give me more of your life savings, bring your teenage daughter along.' This is the worst thing that you have ever done."

"Carrie...it's not that bad," he snickered.

But after spending an hour watching me rotating through drills, he knew that he was horribly wrong. Not only was I the only female student, but at the age of 14, I was two years older than the other campers. Age groups rotated through hitting and fielding stations manned by the college players. My turn always came last, during the "softball section." After the cute, college coaches carefully placed the older boys in proper batting stances and encouraged their techniques, I stepped up and they awkwardly stepped back. I felt their eyes analyzing the movements of my stiff, chunky body as I repeatedly missed hitting and catching the lone softball that my Dad had provided from the back of the van.

By the end of the morning workshop, my Dad had retreated to the van and his sports radio station until we came running into the parking lot with our complaints ("Bill Robinson's coaching staff doesn't know what the hell it's talking about. At all. This is an awful waste of time"). Our father never missed

a teachable moment. He accused us of over-exaggerating, because it wasn't so bad, that even death wasn't bad, for we would end up in heaven as people who had done their best. We grumbled on the way to 7-11, through the aisles, and back into the parking lot. On the way home, Dad caught my icy stare in the rearview mirror.

"You ungrateful kids!" he yelled. "You don't know how lucky you are. I could go down to the city, open these van doors, and a hundred street kids would jump in and never complain."

"Go get them then."

"Yeah, go get them and drop us off."

Soon after Bill Robinson's baseball clinic, my father stopped enrolling us in sports camps. He was responding to either our silent threats or my blatant refusal to touch a softball. But just as Dad understood that his children might not experience athletic glory, I began to admire Levittown's maturing male athletes. I didn't have a boyfriend or many male friends in junior high. What I did have were the promises offered by my collection of Molly Ringwald movies. I knew that when I arrived in the high school, the star football player would immediately spot me in a crowd of people walking down the hall. That night, he would search his yearbook for my face, ask his friends for advice, and eventually sneak an unexpected note to me as I studied French in the library. In the meantime, I wanted to meet the friends of these figments of my imagination. And the only time I really talked to boys was during pick-up games on the street. Our high school didn't have co-ed club sports teams, so if I wanted to improve my social status through athletics, I needed to make a Varsity team. I wanted immediate success, so I focused on fall sports. I knew that I was too slow for field hockey and too lazy for cross country. That left volleyball or tennis. The high school courts bordered the football practice field, so I searched for a racket in our garage. I found one amongst the remnants of athletic supplies that my father had "borrowed" during his high school coaching job. Having never played tennis before, I was nervous about the odds of making the team. But the sport wasn't popular in our blue collar community, softball had strengthened my arms, and I knew how to hustle. Within a couple of days, I made the team. My father was thrilled. His presence at matches made me nervous, so I restricted him to the parking lot on the other side of the football practice field. The attention I sought came from the boys in helmets and practice jerseys. Between drills, they whistled until their coaches forced them to run wind sprints for turning their focus from the field. Unfortunately for my doubles partner, I was more aware of the numbered jerseys than the location of the ball.

Between points, I glanced at the field instead of the opponents across the net. Time after time, I was caught off guard in the split second that the ball left a racket and hit the court. If I were lucky enough to stand behind its bounce, I had a good chance of earning a point. If not, I ducked, yelled, or swung violently at the air. Never identifying my lack of focus, coaches, teammates, and the parents of my doubles partner relied in the power of my service placement. So after a series of failed returns and misdirected volleys, I served with energy and concentration. I then checked to see if any of the football players admired my form. Worthy opponents sensed my distraction and returned the ball to my feet, leaving me no reaction time. Tennis fans and parents increasingly voiced their frustration.

"Carrie! What are you blind?"

"What are you waiting for?"

"All right, shake it off. Here we go."

"I'm going to laugh....I can't watch."

"I swear! That girl is ruining our daughter's chances of a scholarship."

"Carrie, the ball can't bounce twice."

"What are you, posing?"

"You have to talk to the coach, this can't go on."

"Ohh, shhheeeesshhh." my own mother would sigh. And far away in the parking lot, a horn honked inside of a minivan.

By the fall of my senior year, I had not found a date or a winning record on the tennis court. I still

didn't know anybody on the Varsity men's teams, and my Molly Ringwald moment in the hall had not arrived. My last season of tennis was soon to end, and along with it my faint spotlight on the court. It appeared that I was fated to enter college as a virgin. Only one opportunity to seek athletic recognition remained. Every November, the physical education department sponsored a female football game for senior girls. They called the event "Powder Puff" because nobody tackled each other or wore helmets. Regardless of the toned-down game, the "Powder Puff" woman had a reputation to uphold. She desired a piece of the action, a taste of blood, a touchdown. During the autumn months of a female's sophomore and junior years, phys-ed teachers, coaches, and Varsity athletes of every sport highlighted the Powder Puff rite of passage through descriptions of practice sessions and after-parties. Over a series of fall practices, any girl who wanted to participate was assigned a position and instructed through passing drills, field goals, and football terminology. Volunteer members of the men's football team coached practice sessions, and gym teachers nominated female captains to deliver emotional pep talks the night of the game. My father had been asking me when practice sessions would begin as soon as tennis preseason began in August. I pretended to care and answered his questions. I was only participating so that I could have close contact with members of the men's football team. I even agreed to have catches with my Dad in the backyard to improve my reflexes and hopefully impress my future coach. On the first night of practice, I joined my tennis teammates, other senior girls, and the men's football team in the gymnasium. I didn't know where to go or what to do, but I soon found myself practicing with a defensive squad. The senior captains of the men's team, with the assistance of their girlfriends, arranged us into specialties, otherwise known as areas of social status. I noticed the distinctions as I walked out to the practice field for the first time with my group and our assigned coaches. I fell in with girls that I had never seen before. They shared an enjoyment for discussing subjects that alienated our male coaches, such as the position of the maxi pad within a variety of football stances. The only other persons more miserable than I were the third-string members of the men's team assigned to coach our group instead of any other group with bonafide tits. Once again, I found myself taking instructions from handsome, knowledgeable young coaches who yelled instructions while facing another direction. After our third and final confusing practice the evening before game night, I still had no idea what I was supposed to do in the actual game. My father, on the other hand, was fully prepared. He had planned the following night's departure and arrival times, factoring in the frigid forecast. Already, he had equipped the van with old blankets from the garage and extra windshield cleaner. He asked me about my final preparations.

"How does everything look, Care? Good?"

"I don't know. I could really care less. I don't even know why I'm doing this."

"Aren't you having fun with your friends?"

"I suck and I never want to go back."

"Ohhh," he snickered. "What position are you playing?"

"Right half-back."

The morning of game night brought butterflies to the pit of my stomach. I concentrated on nothing besides how I was going to humiliate myself that evening. As the afternoon buses departed out of the bus circle, I looked at my younger neighbors, envious that they could begin the long weekend with carefree spirits. Three hours later, I sat in the minivan and headed back to school. My father made a short pit-stop at 7-11 to appease my brothers, who were not happy to be arriving before game time.

"Dad, why are we going an hour and a half early with Carrie?" David asked between mouthfuls of Twinkies as the van pulled out of the parking lot.

"Don't you want to see how they run warm-ups?"

"Yeah, when we're going to see a professional sports game. This is pointless."

"What a way to celebrate gratefulness on Thanksgiving, David. I know a lot of city kids who would kill for this opportunity." He caught John's glare in the rearview mirror and added, "You kids aren't thankful for anything."

I demanded that my father drop me off at the top of the bus circle so that those who drove couldn't

see my departure from the family van. Sliding the van door shut, I winced at the wind chill and pulled my sweatshirt up to my eyes. Several other girls were running from the parking lot into the building, and I sprinted to catch up with them. We entered the gymnasium. I noticed that the others were dressed in layers of thermal shirts and socks. Only my sweatshirt, a long-sleeved t-shirt and sweatpants would protect me from the wind chill. I wished that I had taken my father's advice and worn long underwear under my clothes.

"Are you insane?" I had shouted earlier that evening. "That is none of your business. Go the hell back downstairs."

After a half hour of smiling at people I didn't really know and making small talk with my tennis teammates, we assembled for team photos in the middle of the gym. Our gym teachers then stood in front of the exit signs and reviewed the rules. Nobody spoke. They paused to consult one another. Patches of excited chatter and team chants anticipated the opening of the doors.

Twenty minutes later, I stood on the sideline and stared at my father in the stands. My glare was interrupted by the laughter of the crowd. Seven boys had organized a makeshift cheerleading squad on the sidelines. They wore wigs and colorful, padded bras over their grey sweat suits. They carried pom-poms and, at the moment our huddle broke up, piled on top of each other in a very unstable pyramid. I watched them topple over, wishing desperately to be at the bottom of their stack. I turned back towards the field and stared at my feet, praying that they would burst into flames and deliver me from my turn on the field. Several of the girls in the field were ignoring the no-tackle rule and jumping into their opponents, provoking whistles and howls from the stands, the cheerleaders, and their mentor coaches on the sidelines. I didn't want anybody to tackle me. I noticed some of my teammates nervously circulating the bench and asking members of other strings if they wanted extra playing time. But before I could gain feeling in my feet and move closer to them, somebody yelled "Second String Defense!"

I jogged to the opposite side of the field and aligned myself with the girl across from me. The announcer reviewed the latest play, highlighting the speed and agility of my doubles partner, who currently led her team in rushing yards. The whistle blew. I glanced at my father's place in the stands. He held the camcorder in one hand and waved with the other. I looked back at the field. Somebody was rushing towards me. I froze and recognized her as the sweet girl who studied music with my piano teacher. She glared and I stepped aside. Unfortunately, she was followed by my doubles partner and the football. Anticipating my failure to perform, a teammate standing behind me ran up to tag her. I looked into the stands. My father was staring at me, holding the camcorder at his side. The announcer reviewed the latest run of my tennis partner, and our offense came running onto the field. I jogged back to the sidelines and walked straight towards the bench. Several of the girls who asked earlier for last-minute replacements huddled under an army blanket. Without asking, I sat at the end of their row and pulled the blanket over my knees. We watched the rest of the half and our team's halftime huddle from the bench.

I played in only one other down at the very end of the second half. Either the opposing captains hadn't identified my weak link or my doubles partner took pity on me, because I didn't move a muscle. The whistle blew one final time. I ran off the field, jumped the fence, and exited the stadium with the crowd. I preferred to wait by the gate for my father instead of returning with the girls to the gym. I didn't care that my team lost by four points. I didn't care that I would miss the final comments of our male coaches or their after-party invitations. My family soon walked through the gate, and I followed my brothers back to the mini-van. I felt my Dad's hand on my back.

"Care, I'm proud of you."

"Why? I almost gave away a touchdown."

"Yeah, I'm not proud of her," David offered.

"Shut your mouth!" Dad threw the camcorder at him and continued.

"Because ... you showed up when you didn't want to."

"Whatever," I mumbled and jumped into the backseat. The door slammed shut and the van waited in the parking lot traffic until a path cleared. I looked out the window. A few other girls were leaving with families instead of friends and sat in backseats or behind the wheels. I watched my Dad in the rearview mirror, honking his horn and maneuvering through the temporary chaos. I wondered then if he realized that he was driving me home from an athletic event for the last time. He pulled out of the

parking lot and turned onto the drive that led to the highway home. I pushed my head against the seat and smiled. Ten years after watching from the stands, I had entertained the crowd. I wasn't the one holding the pom-poms or teasing the whistles of male admirers, but I had made it off the bleachers for one final game with the neighborhood kids.

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