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# UNSOLVABLE PROOFS

BY JEFF TAMMEN

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Within the high concrete walls of the racquetball court the echo of every voice sounds like a cry. The howling usually comes from my father and other competitors who come here to play in the evenings, but this morning the wail that resonates through the breezeway is from my seven-year-old nephew, Isaac. He traces the perimeter of the court, exploring with his fingers the streaks and pock marks made by the racquets scraping against the walls. He's hardly aware of the dust he kicks up in the corners, the dimness of light within the court, the banshee-like inflection of his voice, making this place feel to me even more like a dungeon.

I wonder sometimes what he thinks these rooms are for. It's interesting how people interpret these walls. When I play matches against my father, I see students practicing ballroom dancing in the other courts, I see them kicking soccer balls, singing scales, making out, playing blind man's bluff. The one thing I had never witnessed was someone screaming at the top of their lungs. That is, until I brought Isaac here for the first time. Although he may not have understood the game that's played within these walls, he immediately recognized that this was a place where people came to deal with their frustrations. It's almost as if he could feel the tension from the previous night's matches looming in the stagnant air of the courts.

I've tried to explain the meaning of these walls, to show him how men compete against each other here, but I don't think he understood. He was unable to follow the seemingly random pattern as the ball bounced and ricocheted inside the confined area. It's the geometry of the game that's most difficult for beginning racquetball players to grasp. Even now I can tell that Isaac has no sense of angles as he wanders an arbitrary route around the room, slapping the palms of his hands against the cold concrete where dried blood and spit have permanently stained the walls.

Once Isaac has all but lost his voice and sweat is speckling the back of his shirt, I squeeze the rubber plugs out of my ears and ask if it's time to go home. He doesn't know what I said, since I mumble when I speak, but he's anticipated my question and is nodding before I finish the sentence. I take his hand, as my sister has instructed me to do whenever we're outside the house, and we walk back through the chilly breezeway, across the baseball diamond and yellowing soccer fields, looking both ways before we traverse the busy street, and wind our way back to my sister's house at the end of a cul-de-sac. Once inside, he attempts to guide me to his bedroom where every toy imaginable is tucked away in his closet, but my sister stops us in the hall. She directs a series of gestures at Isaac, her lips moving as quickly and silently as her fingers, which prompts him to continue on to his room alone.

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“What did you say to him?”

“I said I needed to talk to you.”

My sister always needs to talk to me. Sometimes I think she's trying to make up for the years of silence that pervaded our father's home.

I follow her into the kitchen where the majority of our adult conversations take place. She gets out a cucumber, two pieces of bread, and a jar of mayonnaise and begins slicing cucumber for sandwiches. As usual, she does exactly what I've told her not to do, which is hold the vegetable in her hand while she cuts it. Normally I would get out the cutting board and place it on the counter in front of her, but it seems I've already done something to annoy her this morning and I don't want to make things worse for myself.

“How are classes going?” she asks.

“I dropped history. If I don't pass my next exam, I'll fail geometry too.”

“Sounds like you have more time on your hands,” she says.

I rearrange the magnets on the refrigerator, transforming the chaotic display into an outline of an equilateral triangle.

“Did you add that ASL class you said you were going to take?”

She concentrates hard on the cucumber, not because she's afraid of cutting her hand, but because she can never look directly at me when we discuss, what she considers to be, important matters.

“I decided to take it next semester.”

She lays down the paring knife and stares out the window. Surveying the backyard, which is windswept and covered in stickers, she exhales deeply.

“Do you ever plan to communicate with your nephew?”

“We don't need to communicate,” I say, transforming the triangle into an octagon. “We understand each other just fine.”

“Really? He says the only thing you ever do with him is take him to those smelly racquetball courts.”

Like every other conversation we have about Isaac, this is really about how she wants me to be more involved in his life. What she doesn't seem to understand is, while I have no problem being his playmate, I don't know how to be more involved. I realize that about seventy percent of being a good uncle is setting an example, which I make an effort to do, but the other thirty percent is something I'm not any good at. It's all the nurturing, supporting, and encouraging that's as foreign to me as a Russian folk dance. For me, trying to talk to my nephew is like attempting to solve a geometric proof—I don't understand the steps involved to complete a successful transaction.

While she slathers mayonnaise on the crustless bread, as if playing a violin while singing her usual refrain, my sister begins reciting her list of *why can't you's*, which grows longer each time we have this conversation. “Why can't you spend more time with Isaac?” she asks. “Why can't you talk to him every once in while about something that isn't superficial? He *does* read lips,

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you know.” “Why can’t you attend his back to school night?” “Why can’t you stay with him when I fly out to Jersey for mom’s wedding shower?” As much as she might think these are all different questions, the *why can’t you’s* really culminate in one unspoken accusation: Why can’t you replace Isaac’s father?

I don’t have an answer to any of her questions and now that lunch is on the table I’m ready to leave. I don’t even want to stay long enough to see Isaac again. When I do see him, I think of the shrill cry that echoes through the racquetball courts whenever we go there, the inhuman sound that floods through the breezeway like a phoenix bursting into flames. For a seven-year-old I know he has a lot of issues and it pains me to see hurt like that coming from him, especially when I feel like there’s nothing I can do to help. If I were able to talk to him, I would tell him the single most significant thing my father taught me: Grief should remain confined to the heart and conveyed through laughter, never tears. Most importantly, it shouldn’t be uttered in the presence of others, and never, under any circumstances, should it be shared with family.

My performance on the racquetball court is all instinct, which is why I’ve improved so much in the past few years. When I’m playing I don’t have to think about postulates and theorems, memorizing new signs in order to speak with Isaac, the fact that my mother is going on her third marriage, or the daily reminder that my sister will never remarry. It’s as if life outside these walls fades to black, like a photograph someone forgot to dip in acid rinse. All sense of reason escapes with the sweat. Memories, aside from those in my muscles, temporarily disappear, allowing me to perform to the best of my ability, permitting me to exist outside of my life.

The racquetball court is the only place I see my father anymore. When I was growing up, he played every evening, setting up matches with strangers he met in the breezeway, men he would know for years only as on-court opponents. It wasn’t until I was old enough to find my own ride that he allowed me to play with him. I had always thought he didn’t want to compete against me because it meant one of us, either father or son, would have to experience the indignity of defeat while the other attempted to stifle the thrill of victory. I realize now there was more to it than that. In fact, during class the other day, while I should have been trying to solve a proof, I scribbled out a list of my own unsolvable equations:

*Given:* Although my father and I meet several times a week to play racquetball, we hardly speak to each other. During the game we’re both too busy rebuking ourselves for our imperfect performances.

*Prove:* My father and I have a functional relationship despite the fact that we have nothing to say to each other, despite the fact that we are unable to express our esteem for each other in any way.

*Given:* No one ever wins a racquetball match. If my father beats me he dwells on the fact that I played poorly. If I win, he becomes so angry with himself that I receive no acknowledgement of the victory.

*Prove:* My father is not a selfish person. Deep down he is proud of my progress. He is

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pleased that I am only a few classes away from a bachelor's degree, that I have outlined and achieved a number of goals for myself.

*Given:* My father used to hold back when playing racquetball to make me feel like I was a challenge. Now I have to hold back so he doesn't spend the rest of the evening brooding over the fact that his athletically-challenged son has beaten him at a game he's been dominating for years.

*Prove:* I am not like my father. Not playing to the best of my ability is not my way of showing support or helping to preserve my father's pride. It is my way of preserving our relationship.

I'm going back over this list of proofs in my head when my father enters the racquetball court. He places his water bottle and car keys in the corner where children have etched random numbers in crayon on the walls. He does not need any time to warm up. Like me, he acts as if his body is perpetually limber and loose, even though he did stretches before he arrived.

"Did you bring it?" he asks.

"Bring what?"

"You said next time you were going to bring your game."

We both laugh, the way we do whenever he makes a joke. I have to hand it to my father, he may not be able to hold on to a lot in his life, but he's managed to maintain a sense of humor.

Once the games begin, an invisible wall is erected between us—one with a giant mirror, which allows us to see only our own mistakes on the court. Obscenities immediately become as abundant as mis-hits, curses as frequent as side outs. The smallest slip-up on my father's part incites a series of swear words and abuse. I've heard him call himself every imaginable combination of cuss words, which was a little more than disconcerting when we first began playing together. But because I've seen this side of him for so many years now, I too have started disparaging myself during our games. Anyone who overhears our matches from the breezeway probably thinks we're verbally attacking each other, but the truth is we're practically unaware of each other's presence. On the court, as with any other proving ground, our fiercest competitor is ourselves.

My father easily wins the first match of the evening. Because he's playing so well, landing all the low shots, lobbing the ball perfectly into the back corners of the court, I am performing poorly. My theory is when two competitors share a court they both draw their energy, skill, and luck from the same reserve, so that if one plays well, it stands to reason that other plays badly. My father and I have never been on equal ground in the racquetball court. One of us always has the advantage. If only this principle weren't true, I think maybe we could be more supportive of each other. On the other hand, if my father has taught me anything, it's that *if only's* are tell-tale signs of living in denial.

My father spent the first nine months of his divorce reflecting on *if only's*. At a time when he should have been smothering his children with affection, appreciating what he had left of his previous life, he withdrew into himself, providing me and my sister with minimum support to help us through the transition. To this day I don't think he's ever recovered from his abrupt and, what he considers to be, unwarranted separation from my mother. I think the divorce is why he took up racquetball in the first place. To me at least, it's an explanation for why he's so hard on himself. As if he hasn't suffered enough, a few nights a week he makes himself a

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martyr on the court, as if the act of self-flagellation will bring about some kind atonement.

Why my father does this to himself I'll never know. My mother forgave him long ago for being, she once told my sister, "an emotionally-challenged husband who was as loyal as a Labrador, but as loving as an iguana." Although my mother has moved on to husband number three, (which should tell my father something) my father still struggles with guilt from his marriage. Of course, his divorce isn't the only thing he blames himself for; he feels responsible for my sister's separation as well. If only he had been a more devoted father, I overheard him once tell her. If only he had spent more time with her family, gone to more birthday parties and company picnics. If only he had set a better example in his marriage.

After a short-lived comeback, during which I had to offer my father a few setups to prevent myself from winning the games, my father takes the second match, but as usual, expresses no pride in his imperfect victory. We both crouch, leaning against the walls, the coldness of the concrete soothing our backs through our sweat-drenched shirts. My father is still assessing his performance from the last couple plays, perhaps figuring out what he could have done to stop me from making those sideline shots.

I pretend to examine the strings of my racquet as he catches his breath between continuous gulps of water. The only words we'll speak to each other will be to set the next match. I would like to ask him about his life now, how he's doing, if he's seeing anyone, when he'll finally retire—but I can't. Previous attempts have only resulted in disappointment. When my sister interrogates him, in her stubborn need-to-know-all way, he sometimes tells her things, which is why I know anything about him at all. As much as I hate to admit it I've become one of those strangers whom he knows only as an on-court opponent. He uses me the same way he's always used them: To deal with the grief of losing his family.

At my sister's request, I'm taking Isaac in the opposite direction of the middle school, to someplace equally as captivating to a six-year old, and equally as off-limits as the racquetball courts. It's unfortunate for Isaac that my sister never outgrew the overprotective tendencies that come with having a child, and a hearing impaired one at that. When we go to the racquetball courts she's afraid Isaac will get hit in the eye with a ball or scrape his knee on the concrete. She's prohibited me from taking him any place that has potential safety hazards, that isn't within a mile or two of a hospital, that doesn't have a phone available in case of an emergency. Despite having been born with a disability, Isaac is a perfectly healthy, active child. What my sister should be more concerned about, in my opinion, is his emotional well-being.

I find it more than a little troubling that she not only goes out of her way to protect him from cuts, bruises, mosquito bites, and sunburn, but she also prevents him from seeing his father—as if he were more dangerous than the germs on a drinking fountain. She acts as if she doesn't know what it's like to need a father. Granted, my sister and I lived under the same roof as our father, but based on the quality of parental guidance we received, he may as well have not been there at all. I know she depends on me to help socialize Isaac, but I'm no substitute for his father. I don't understand how she could think that me taking him for walks in the mornings is equivalent to having a father figure in his life. Even if she can't get past her differences with Isaac's father, how could she subject him to a childhood like her own?

When we approach the new soon-to-be lakeside housing development, which looks like a dusty graveyard of skeleton houses crowded around an excavation site, I pull on Isaac's sleeve

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and tell him to stop. Kneeling down, I search the loose dirt for rusty nails, which are abundant and easy to find in construction areas. I deliver my silent disclaimer, first holding up a nail for Isaac to see, then pressing its point against the rubber sole of my sneaker and mouthing the words, *Be Careful*. In one motion, Isaac nods and runs off toward the houses, where he will walk through the imaginary walls, ascend the elaborate staircases, and crouch in the shadows of the doorless closets.

As I wander from entryway to kitchen to bedroom to backyard, doing my best to keep an eye on Isaac, I think about the dynamic between me and my father on the court last night. From the beginning of the evening, the most noticeable difference in our play was that I was on the mark, which, according to my on-court theory, meant he wasn't even close to demonstrating the extent of his abilities. Every serve of his was off, every shot straight down the middle—a *Goddamn fucking set up*, he would yell, before I even scored the point. By the end of the second game I was taking nothing but risky shots in an effort to slow down my progress. Still, I scored too often, which fueled my father's anger since he couldn't seem to do anything but offer me the advantage.

While my father is generally a good sportsman (meaning that although he has the tendency to make one uncomfortable with his uncontrollable assaults of self-deprecation, he never gets hostile or passive-aggressive toward his opponents) I thought we might come to blows over my performance on the court. Not because I had attempted to cheat or because I was playing too well, but because I was not breaking as much of a sweat as I usually do.

"You're holding back," he said, for the first time shattering the invisible wall between us.

Ignoring the accusation (one that I had made several times myself when we first began playing together), I served the ball so that it ricocheted off the side wall, just behind the service line, and cut across the back half of the court at a forty-five degree angle. He's rarely able to return that serve, and as poorly as he was playing, I wasn't surprised to see him miss.

After a few more rallies, all of which I won, my father threw his racquet against the wall, chipping some paint from the concrete. "You're still holding back," he yelled, the redness of his face making his mustache stand out like a white picket fence in a sun-baked desert.

"It's game point," I said. "How the hell am I holding back?"

"The only reason I have any points is because you're taking stupid shots. This isn't a one-walled game! You should be running my ass!"

I had seen my father get in other peoples' faces before, but never had he raised his voice like that to me. Growing up, and especially after the divorce, he was always that annoying parent (when he actually went to my games) who ran along the sidelines of the soccer field hollering at players and questioning the referee's calls. He was frequently impatient with store clerks, stand-offish with authorities, and, in his own way, overprotective of me and my sister. Which is why I was so stunned when he directed his anger toward me. I didn't understand it. It's not as if I was making a show of my charity, the way he used to do with me—swearing even more than usual when he intentionally missed a shot, as if I couldn't tell the difference between his regular disparagement and the feigned variety.

Lying awake in bed last night, since it's never easy for me to sleep after a match, I think I figured out what got him so riled. For my father, the act of playing racquetball is release from the real world; it allows him to focus solely on the competition between players and forget about the conflicts of everyday life. Which is why, whenever he went to the racquetball courts, he always played one of the kids who hung out in the breezeway or some guy he met the previous week during a game of cutthroat, never an acquaintance from work, a close friend, or family. I was aware that my father only played with people he didn't know, yet it didn't register

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until last night why he did this.

I can't imagine retreating every evening to my personal sanctuary only to have a reminder of all my failures, all my disappointments, and unresolved issues follow me there. And yet, that's what I must be to my father: A constant reminder. My presence reminds him of my mother, of his years as a neglectful parent. I make him think about everything he goes to the courts not to think about. To exacerbate matters, I've begun beating him more and more at the one thing he's never lost at in his life. Being the unofficial champion of his chosen sport is the one thing he's managed to hold on to all these years and now I'm taking that away from him. The closer I try to get to my father it seems the more I push him away.

As I turn this thought over in my head, I become conscious of the fact that Isaac is nowhere in sight. I wander around the side of the house and peer inside a bedroom window. As I circle the house, picking off the burs that cling to my shoelaces and socks, I squint into the dusty panes, poke my head through the doors, and survey the piles of materials neatly stacked in each backyard. My sister would murder me if she knew I was letting Isaac run around unsupervised at a construction site. As it is, she's constantly reminding me of all the ways I can be a better uncle to him: "Why can't you be more careful with Isaac?" "Why can't you teach him a less physical sport?" "Why can't you be more than his friend?" "Why can't you visit him after class?" "Why can't you grow up and accept more responsibility?"

When I enter the garage of the next house over, I hear a faint cry coming from somewhere inside. "Isaac!" I yell, hurrying inside. I keep calling his name as I race through the rooms, stepping through walls, over cross beams. I find him underneath the kitchen sink, holding both hands on top of his head. I doubt he can see me through the tears in his eyes, so I grab hold of his thighs and slide him out from the underneath the metallic basin. It isn't until he's in my arms that he really begins to wail, which would sound, to anyone within earshot, like the yowling of a lost puppy.

It's sad that the only sounds Isaac makes are brought about by pain. Not once have I heard him shout or giggle with excitement. Even as an infant he never cooed when pressed to my sister's chest, never made noise of any kind unless it was a cough or a whimper. It's not that Isaac has a cynical outlook on life or that he doesn't appreciate the sacrifices his mother has made for him, it's just that when he feeds the ducks at the park, when he does a near perfect dive at the public swimming pool, when he studies his mathematics for school, he knows something is missing. Whether he's aware of it or not, the void that I know resides in his heart at times seems as vast and endless as a moonless sky.

I gently run my fingers through his brown hair, feeling around for a knot. Sure enough, there is a substantial lump, throbbing, burning hot with its own pulse, on the top of his head. This is the first time I have felt directly accountable for Isaac's pain. The responsible thing to do would be to take him home and have my sister attend to his injury, but I don't want her to know how or why this happened. I can't bear to hear any more *why can't you's*. Besides, home is the last place I know Isaac wants to go.

Once he's calmed down and the tears have dried, I take his hand and lead him through the front door, out to the street. We walk along the curb, where sawdust and dirt collect in the gutters like soap scum, and I steer Isaac clear of the occasional nail. I have to admit, after what transpired back in the skeleton house, I have a better understanding of why my sister is so overprotective of Isaac. There's nothing worse than feeling the heaving chest of a child against your own, the warm tears burning your fingertips as you wipe them away, and knowing that the hurt was because of you. Whether disregarding their feelings, disciplining them with a spanking, or allowing them to harm themselves, the last thing anyone wants is that rotten fruit feel of your insides withering as you realize it's all your fault.

The walk to the racquetball courts seems longer than any we've ever taken together. Usually I

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enjoy the silence between us, which is something I could never hope to expect from my sister, but today, despite the sounds of a crackly transistor radio in the distance, the usual suburban hum of traffic, the absence of conversation is deafening. I want to apologize for the bump on his head, about not spending more time with him, not knowing sign language. I want to tell him I'm sorry he can't see his father. There are so many things I suddenly have the urge to say to my nephew and no way for me to say them.

It occurs to me, at this very moment, why Isaac screams in the racquetball courts: The worst part about being deaf isn't your inability to hear, but to express to others, people who don't know sign language or are too inexperienced to read lips, what you're feeling inside. Suddenly I'm overwhelmed with deafness. My tongue, my words are completely disarmed, like a revolver without a hammer. More than anything I want Isaac to know that I love him and that I do make an effort to be more than his playmate. I want my sister to know that I'm proud of her for taking care of Isaac as well as she does, as difficult as it must be raising him by herself. And I want my father to know that we do have more than one thing in common. I wish I could tell my family all these things, but I can't. I wish I could at least let my father know that there is hope for us yet, but I know right now he's somewhere in an office on the other side of town and his ears are ringing just as loudly as mine.

The message was left on my answering machine at 2:25 in the afternoon, while I was failing an exam in geometry class. *I can't make it to the courts tonight. Maybe we can get together sometime next week. I'll give you a call.* I knew he was blowing me off, but just to confirm my suspicion I drove by the school to see if he was there. Sure enough, his car was parked at the end of the breezeway, as if he intended to block off the entrance. I thought about leaving a note on his windshield, but I didn't know what to write. I could have taken the same accusatory tone he took with me, but that wouldn't have motivated him to call me any sooner. An apology would only have acknowledged my guilt, which is the last thing I want since I didn't really do anything wrong in the first place. I finally decided, as I always do, to wait it out. Even though it's been a week, there is the possibility, however slight, that he'll swallow his pride and call like he said he would.

In the meantime, I'm trying to keep a promise I made to myself and not my sister: Be more protective of Isaac. Learn new signs so I can speak to him. Offer him guidance as well as friendship. I've started by teaching him the rules of racquetball, showing him how gratifying it can be to push yourself and your opponent. Of course, he's lucky at this point if his racquet makes contact with the ball, and even luckier if he can hit it to the far wall. More often than not he smacks the ball into the ground or straight up at the ceiling. The important thing is he's learning, not just how to play the game, but how to express feelings of contentment. On a few occasions I've caught him grunting with satisfaction as he executed a perfect forehand shot or chased the ball to the back of the court, saving it from that dreaded second bounce. Those are the moments I value most. If only I had more moments like those with my father.

I'm still trying to figure out ways to solve my personal problems, especially the one about preserving my relationship with my father. Because he is unable to talk to me about anything worth talking about, our relationship seems confined to the racquetball court where we compete as strangers. It makes me wonder if our relationship has always been this one-sided, with me competing for his attention. It also forces me to reflect on my relationship with Isaac and wonder how long he's been battling for my affection. I want the matches Isaac and I play to be different from the ones my father and I beat ourselves over. I'm trying to make that distinction by doing something for him that my father never did for me—I'm instructing him how to actually

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play the game. I'm teaching him everything I've learned from my experiences on the court, everything I've learned not to do within these walls.

This morning, as Isaac and I stand on our respective sides of the court, warming up with a few short rallies, I realize, however, that I've been doing exactly what I told myself I wouldn't do: I've been intentionally missing shots and blundering plays so that Isaac won't feel so bad about his own mistakes. I tell myself it's okay right now (he probably hasn't seen me play enough yet that he knows the extent of my abilities), but once his game improves I will have to stop. I remember the resentment I used to feel toward my father for doing that very same thing. It's amazing how easily sacrifices can be misunderstood.

I tell Isaac I'm going to get a drink of water, that he should stand at the service line and practice his low shots the way I have shown him. But instead of retreating out to the breezeway, I crouch down in the back of the court, observing his progress as he alternates between his backhand and forehand. It will be a while before we can play competitive matches together, but it's something I look forward to, the same way my nine-year-old self anticipated playing with my father. If only my experience with him had been as rewarding as I thought it would be. If only my father could have seen the competition between us in a different light. If only he would have let go of the past and focused on what we had in the present.

Along with waiting for my father to come back around, nothing frustrates me more than uncertainty. Last week could very well have been our last match together. I know he uses racquetball as a sort of therapy, and that by sharing the court with him I nullify those affects, but more than I need the exercise or the companionship, I need my father. And racquetball is the only connection we have anymore. Although we had completely separate lives when I still lived under his roof, I still had the benefit of his guidance when I really needed it. He may not have been the most expressive or reliable parent, but he was there nonetheless.

Now he prefers to spend his time with strangers instead of his own son. I don't know if this is what Isaac thinks about in regard to his father, but I can imagine what he must feel not having him there. I watch Isaac sweating through the back of his shirt, working hard to strengthen our bond, and I wonder how a parent, even when restrained by the law, is able to keep themselves from being with their own child. The mere idea makes me feel a pain in my chest, pressure in my throat. I feel like a steam whistle, with thick black smoke clogging my esophagus. I've been pushing down my own pain for way too long. I need to let it out, release what's been building inside me since my own parents' divorce. As my own echoing voice resounds through the court and out into the breezeway, all I see is Isaac. Even if he could hear my cry, I think, he would only mistaken it for his own.

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**Jeff Tannen** has more than six hundred story rejections and two dozen publications. While the rejections are a fun part of the publishing process, he concedes that the publishing side of the business is even more rewarding. His work has appeared in *Cezanne's Carrot*, *Underground Voices*, *42Opus*, and *Raving Dove* among others. A true science-fiction fan at heart, he also dabbles in speculative fiction and aspires to see his novels in the stacks alongside his

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favorite author, Alastair Reynolds. Jeff currently teaches English and composition at Fresno City College and is developing an adolescent sci-fi/fantasy series that he hopes to complete this summer.