

Tyler Wurst

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“Fall Ball” games ended at 7:30, and it was now nearly eight. Tyler’s mother was late picking him up. She rarely stayed to watch her son play, couldn’t really, Coach imagined, encumbered as she was by two other children, one sticky-faced and hanging from her, the other jerking about in a bird-shit-splattered umbrella stroller.

It was a school night and the parking lot was soon empty. Coach’s son and wife had lingered a little before leaving. His wife would see to dinner, and the boy would take a shower. Coach would be home in a few.

Coach busied himself cleaning the dugout. He amassed a small stack of bubblegum wrappers, two empty Gatorade bottles, a baseball cap. Tyler stood outside the dugout, rolling a ball off its pitched roof. They walked in silence to the parking lot and stood near Coach’s car, looking back at the field. It was October and the leaves were yet to fully turn, but were dry, dull, and spent.

Coach attempted small talk: pets, the Red Sox, how the sixth grade was going. These conversational forays hit instant dead ends as Tyler had no pets, little interest in spectator sports, and guessed that school was okay. The boy did mention that he liked playing basketball, but Coach did not want to hear about this passion. It was fine, for a lark, for Tyler to bounce a ball up and down a hardwood floor, keep himself in shape and all, but Tyler should focus on baseball, at which he was a marvel.

Those Fall Ball parents who believed that their son was a pretty good player—one who might make his high-school team, compete for an athletic scholarship, play college ball, and, who knows, maybe even get drafted—got a dose of reality upon seeing Tyler Wurst. Tyler would line a pitch over the center field fence, then take the mound and strike out the side. Tyler Wurst

was, according to his teammates, "sick." He was a sick pitcher, a sick hitter and a sick fielder. Kid could play ball.

By rights, Tyler shouldn't even be on the Marauders, Coach's team. It was a rec-league squad: any nine to twelve-year-old who signed up got to play, if not on the Marauders, then on the Sharks, Hawks, Red Devils or Thunderbolts. Tyler belonged on the "select" team, the Bisons. The Bisons' try-out would have been an easy bar for Tyler to clear, but it wasn't cheap to play for them, and travel to other towns, sometimes ones out of state, was required. It was a commitment way beyond Tyler's mother.

Coach's wife called. Coach mentioned in an offhand manner—he knew Tyler could hear him—that he and Tyler were "hanging out" until the boy's mother arrived, shouldn't be too long.

Coach was getting annoyed: this was not part of the deal, babysitting. He was hungry and looking forward to a beer; no doubt Tyler was famished as well, not to mention cold and bored. Coach called Tyler's mother for the second time: no answer, voicemail still full. In addition to the calls, a text had also gone unacknowledged. She knew what time games ended, there was no excuse. If one of the little kids was sick, she had car problems, or there was an emergency of some kind, Coach would understand. But one should call, it wasn't that hard. What if Coach had had to leave right after the game and nobody stayed with Tyler? Somebody probably would have, but as a parent you don't just assume these things. Or maybe you do.

Coach called league president Joe Grady; if there was a protocol for players left at the field, he was sure to tell Coach what it was. Voice mail. He sent Grady a text.

Coach looked up from his phone at Tyler. No eleven-year-old boy could inspire the way he did. Tyler's movements were precise, his instincts perfect, his strength and quickness hard to believe. The mannerisms—the slight shrug of the shoulders and casual flip of the glove before he threw a pitch—were seamless and natural. Everything was fluid, nothing awkward or herky-jerky. And he wore the Marauder uniform well. There were no rolls of prepubescent belly fat pressing against the jersey, or an oddly-shaped or spindly frame such that the shirt hung funny, or was loose and formless.

Coach checked himself; he tried to be restrained in his praise of Tyler, and was particularly vigilant on this score in the presence of his own son, a barely competent third baseman and outfielder. It was unseemly to gush about Tyler, obvious really, like having a crush on the prettiest girl in class.

It was now 8:30, although the darkness and cold made it seem later. The Poshkus Field sports complex—which consisted of two baseball diamonds, a batting cage, a basketball court, and a small playground—was deserted.

He had never seen Tyler's father, but had heard that he was in the Army, or working for a military contractor, perhaps in Afghanistan, or maybe back home now.

"Your father in the service?" he asked Tyler.

"Used to be."

"He live here?"

"No, he's in Georgia. But he moved. He comes up here in July."

"You have a step-dad?"

"No."

They had been sitting on the rear bumper of Coach's car, facing the parking lot entrance, and now Tyler got up, moved a few feet away, turned his back to Coach and began tossing a baseball in the air.

Coach remained on the bumper. So, how did the little kids figure into it? Siblings? Half or step-siblings? Neither?

Coach grabbed his mitt from the trunk and bade Tyler move away from the car, so that they could toss the ball. They threw it back and forth, each catch producing a satisfying *thwunk*. Baseball's auditory elements were tremendous, he'd never really thought about it before, but it was true. Every throw from Tyler was perfect, chest-high and straight-on. There was no chatter, and never a ball thrown over one's head, too short, or too far to one side. Just a rhythmic back-and-forth, like a pendulum. *Thwunk, thwunk, thwunk*. Coach wished life was like this all the time: essential, mindful, trance-like. *Thwunk, thwunk, thwunk*.

Just as Coach was getting a little tired, the parking lot lights went out. They must be on a timer. Now the only light came from a caged, gray fluorescent bulb that hung near the concession stand and equipment shed. Its weak glow did not illuminate the parking lot, and they put their gloves down.

They sat on the Honda's bumper. It had grown colder, and Tyler wore only his short-sleeved baseball jersey. Coach had on a long-sleeved T-shirt under his own jersey, plus a heavy hoodie, and still he was cold. Tyler was rubbing his goose-bumped arms and looking straight ahead. If Tyler were his own son, Coach could have put his arm around the boy, or at least sat closer to him, their bodies touching. Mind you, if Tyler were his own son he would have seen to it that the kid was properly dressed.

Tyler made a motion with his head indicating that they should wait in the car. Coach did not respond, and pretended he hadn't seen this gesture. There was one inviolable rule in Crestview Fall Ball, a regulation which had been stressed repeatedly at the coaches meeting: players were never to be given rides, and coaches' cars were strictly off-limits. Of course, with only the two of them present nobody would know, at least in the moment, if Coach violated this edict, but that was precisely why doing so would be ill-advised.

Coach got up and checked the car again to see if his son might have left a jacket or sweatshirt in the backseat, but there was nothing, no garment had magically appeared. But there was *something*, he now remembered. Coach opened the trunk, and from under the baseball gear removed an old sheet that he had placed under some potted plants he had been moving the previous

weekend. The sheet was dirty, and had a faded pattern of irises on it. Coach shook it out, folded it in half, and gave it to Tyler, who wrapped the material around his upper body like a shawl.

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Tyler Wurst was a gift from the baseball Gods, that had been evident at the first preseason practice, but Coach soon learned that this bounty could be capriciously withdrawn. Tyler was sometimes a no-show for games, and his mother never called or texted to inform Coach that the boy wasn't coming. Tyler would be penciled-in as pitching and batting fourth, but then fail to appear, requiring Coach to frantically rejigger the lineup card minutes before the first pitch.

Coach's pre-game talk, typically a series of half-truths (we can beat this team), bald-faced lies (you guys are looking great) and desperate pleas (outfielders: get the ball in quickly; infielders: cover your base) would flounder when Coach mentioned, *en passant*, that Tyler would not be joining them that evening. The last time this had happened, Spencer, the tiny second baseman, tossed his glove at the dugout fence and said, "We lost."

"What do you mean?" responded Coach. "We have a game to play, let's go get 'em!"

"Yeah, whatever," said Spencer. Coach wanted to shake the kid, but touching players was against Crestview rules. What had happened to grit, determination, do your best? Why was an eleven-year-old giving up so easily? From what defeatist place does "We suck without Tyler" come from? Still, Spencer wasn't wrong in his assessment: the Marauders had never won a game without Tyler.

"Marauders," said Coach, "There is no place for negativity here. This is a unit, a strong team that plays together, and we can take the Red Devils. I know we can!" The Marauders lost badly that night, but Coach did feel that he had said the right thing.

Coach was already nostalgic for the Marauders' first practice, just seven weeks ago, when it was still summer. Desmond had bobbed a grounder that Coach had rolled to him, and as the boy finally got a grip on the ball and flung it back, declared himself an "at-risk youth." This was an assessment, Coach believed, that one should not make of oneself. That same day, Milo, the Marauders' center fielder, self-identified as ADHD as he scaled the chain-link fence on his way to the dugout roof. Coach felt relieved that his own son suffered only from laziness, rather than socioeconomic deprivation or a neurological disorder.

Crestview took all comers: it was an activity, not a high-pressure mission, for the kids to muddle their way through the ten-game Fall Ball season. That was a good thing; Coach disliked the obsessive culture of youth sports, the way tournament teams monopolized family weekends and wrung the spontaneity

from the game. But it was different with Tyler, he needed more than Fall Ball. He had a gift, which, if channeled, could really pay off.

Coach wanted to tell the boy, who was now tossing his baseball glove up in the air and catching it, that he was at a crucial moment, that he needed to go all in. Don't do anything else, Tyler. Sure, school is important, and you should have fun, and girls are nice when it's time for that, but PLAY BALL, always, and with focus and purpose. Don't waste your singular talent. Don't break your wrist skateboarding, squander your time on beer and hangovers, or get discouraged when you reach a level of play where you are not immediately, hands-down, the best in every situation. It was absurd to call Tyler a future major leaguer—the boy was only eleven after all—but if any kid could do it, it was Tyler. Still, the kid had to keep his head on straight, otherwise he'd have no chance.

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It was now 8:50. "You know your Dad's phone number?" Coach asked.

"I don't have a phone."

"Tyler, you know about the Bisons, right?"

"Yeah, sure. Their coach wanted me to play for them."

"And?"

"I couldn't do it because of the papers you had to fill out, and then the date passed to sign up."

Coach assessed Tyler's form as the boy stood in the parking lot, wrapped in the bed sheet, meditatively massaging a baseball. The boy was a swami, a lama of the grand old game.

Coach had Tyler's mother's number in his phone, but could there be one for Tyler's father somewhere? Coach recalled the meeting before the first practice when he had confirmed contact information with parents, and Tyler's mother had made an erasing gesture and told him "You can cross that out," as his hand hovered over a name under hers. Coach went to his file folder in the trunk, and in the dim light rifled through fund-raising fliers, copies of the Crestview Fall Ball by-laws, and old line-up cards. Eventually, he found the copy of the roster he'd been issued by the league; beneath Tyler's mother's name and number, was "Brian Wurst—Father," followed by some digits which he strained to make out, as he had indeed crossed them out.

Coach shined his phone on the paper to better see it, then dialed the number as he walked away from the car. A man answered. There was a television in the background—a game of some kind was on—and lots of people; it sounded like a sports bar. Coach introduced himself as the coach of the Marauders, Tyler's team in Crestview Fall Ball, and asked if he was speaking to Brian Wurst. The call ended. Had the person on the other end even heard him? Did he have the right number? Coach dialed again, he would not pussyfoot around this time, "TYLER WURST" he yelled into the phone. Coach could hear an announcer

talking about running the football, and a woman laughing. He enunciated again, "TYLER WURST."

And then, as if the conversation had been perfectly clear all along, the man on the other end said, "I'm in North Carolina. You need to call his mother."

"I did, but she's not answering, she's supposed to pick him up," said Coach.

"What time?"

"At 7:30. That's why I'm calling."

"Where's Tyler?"

"With me, we're at Poshkus Field. Crestview Fall Ball. The Marauders, I'm the coach."

"Who was she with when she left?"

"When she dropped him off? I don't know, some smaller kids."

"Anybody else?"

"I didn't see anyone, I don't know if ... Is there a grandparent who could pick Tyler up?"

"Not gonna happen," said the man. "This is par for the fucking course with her. Can you put Tyler on?" Coach handed the phone to Tyler, who completed the call in less than a minute, dispensing only the occasional "yup" and "nope," and then returning Coach his phone.

"Everything okay?" asked Coach.

"I guess," said Tyler.

Coach didn't say anything further. Instead, he cupped his hands, and stood about four feet from the boy. Tyler tossed the baseball underhanded to Coach, who quickly returned it. They went back and forth in this manner for a few minutes, and Tyler let his bed sheet fall to the ground. They tossed it a little more, then Tyler shivered.

"Go get in the car," said Coach. "I'll keep a look out for your Mom." Tyler got into the passenger seat. Coach leaned on the car. Maybe he should just drive Tyler home and be done with it. But what if his mother wasn't there, should he leave Tyler alone, or stay and wait with him? That would be awkward. And what if while he and Tyler were en route to the boy's home, Tyler's mother showed up at the field?

Coach looked at his phone and then at Tyler in the passenger seat. Maybe he should turn on the radio for the boy. He wished he had some food, but had already ransacked his bag for any long-forgotten comestibles—perhaps a stale granola bar or rubbery cheese stick—and had come up empty. He and the boy should be eating now, or done eating, actually. He wished he could take Tyler to Keith Brown's Ale House, it was only few blocks away. It was a mellow place, he'd taken the family there a couple of times. They served a nice burger, and had a fine selection of beers. The boy would have a soda, of course. No, he could not do that, could not take Tyler Wurst to Keith Brown's Ale House.

Coach tapped on the window and opened the passenger side door. He handed Tyler his phone, "There's a couple of games on it, let me know if a text or call comes in."

"Thanks," said Tyler, who greedily began swiping and poking at the device. Coach shut the door and looked in at Tyler, whose baseball glove sat on his lap. A mild panic set in. When would he cut this off? At nine? Nine-thirty? Any plan was better than none, Coach reasoned, and decided that in five minutes he would drive to Tyler's house and if nobody was there, bring Tyler home with him. Coach would have to alert his wife of this strategy, and didn't imagine she'd be pleased, but she'd understand. His son would enjoy the surprise sleep-over, even if he was not particularly tight with Tyler, who was cordial enough with his fellow Marauders, but didn't seem to have any close friends on the team. How could he, really? Everyone was in too much awe.

From his perch on the car bumper, Coach could see somebody approaching on foot, not from the parking lot entrance, but from beyond the outfield fence near the playground. The figure was walking in foul territory along the third-base line and was headed toward home plate. Would Tyler's mother walk here? Maybe her car had broken down, and her phone had lost its charge, and here she was, doing the best she could. Of course, he would give the two of them a ride home. The liability issue surely didn't apply when the parent of the child was present. As the person got closer Coach could see that it was not Tyler's mother, it was a man with a small dog, and the two now swung out behind the third base dugout and then the backstop, and began skirting the parking lot on the first-base side. "Evening," said Coach.

The man nodded and said "Hey," and continued walking without hesitating. Coach wanted to explain to this dog walker why he was sitting there in the dark—and wouldn't have mind outlining the conundrum he faced, and perhaps even asking the man for his counsel—but the man and beast proceeded past first base and down the right field line. Eventually they disappeared, no doubt headed for the complex's back exit, which was accessible only by foot or bicycle.

Tyler, engrossed in the phone, hadn't even noticed the dog walker. Coach gazed out into the gloom. It smelled like fall; he wanted to point this out to Tyler, that the air and the plants were different this time of year than in the spring: the tilt of the Earth's axis, the cycle of the earth's rotation around the sun, that was what caused the seasons. Coach would give it one more minute before requesting the phone from Tyler and calling his wife to review the plan he'd formulated.

Coach got in the car. "I think we're going to drop by your place, see if your mom is home. Let me have the phone for a sec."

Just as Coach started texting his wife, a loud vehicle entered the lot and stopped about 30 feet away. Nobody emerged from the car—which was red and had a deep, throaty idle—and Coach put down his phone, got out, and took a few steps. He couldn't see into the red car in the darkness, and retreated and knocked on his own car's passenger-side. Tyler rolled down the window and looked up at him.

"That your mom's car?"

"Yup."

The red car's window slid down. "Tyler there?"

"Certainly is," said Coach.

"Tell him he needs to get over here."

"I'll tell Tyler to get ready," said Coach who crouched next to the passenger door so that he was looking directly at Tyler, who remained seated.

"Your mom wants you."

Tyler didn't move. He tossed his baseball a few inches in the air and caught it, a sequence he repeated several times.

"Tyler!" the boy's mother yelled from her car. Coach now stood against the Honda, leaning on the passenger-side back-seat window so that Tyler was to his left. Coach held his index finger upright in a "just one moment" gesture for the mother's benefit.

"Tyler, your mom is waiting for you," said Coach, loud enough so that both Tyler and his mother could hear him.

Coach approached the red car and addressed Tyler's mother, who sat with her hands on the steering wheel. "He's getting his stuff."

"I have to get these home," she responded, indicating her charges. The youngest child was sleeping in a car-seat in back, an older one sat in the passenger seat playing a hand-held video game, and a third was wedged into the console between the front seats, watching the other's Nintendo screen. Had there always been a third kid, or was this someone new?

"Did you talk to Tyler's father?" asked Coach.

"What do you mean?"

"I called him when I couldn't reach—"

"You didn't need to do that," said Tyler's mother. "That's gonna cause problems."

Coach walked back to his car and got behind the steering wheel. Tyler was still in the passenger seat. The sheet was balled up at Tyler's feet. "I'll take that," said Coach, tossing it in back. Tyler looked straight ahead, he was rotating his baseball in his right hand. "Your Mom, and your ... they're waiting."

"TYLER," shouted the boy's mother from the red car.

"So, we'll see you Friday. We're playing the Sharks," said Coach. "That's a good team, they're in second place."

"Tyler, get your butt over here," the mother said. Coach could hear the red car rattling in the deserted lot.

Tyler slowly got out and gently closed the car door behind him. He walked to the red car, briefly surveyed its occupants, and got in the back seat.

"Tyler!" yelled Coach as the red car started moving toward the exit. "Great game! Good job!" He'd forgotten about that. How could he have? Tyler Wurst had thrown four shut-out innings, and hit two home-runs and a double.

Coach could see the red car's brake lights as it waited to turn onto Lincoln Boulevard. He started his car, and as he reached to turn on the radio, noticed Tyler's baseball mitt lying on the seat.

"Tyler, your glove," he said to no one. Coach accelerated toward the lot's exit in pursuit of the red car, which had turned right. Coach had to wait for two cars to go by until he too could turn right, and then he scanned Lincoln Boulevard for Tyler's mother's car. He thought he saw it stopped at the next light, but as he approached, realized that he was mistaken, it was a maroon Toyota.

Had the red car already cleared the intersection? He stopped behind the Toyota, and when the light changed, the Toyota, and the cars to Coach's left, moved forward, revealing Tyler's mother's car in the left-turn-lane. Coach was separated from the red car by a lane of traffic, and he yelled out his window, "Tyler, your glove, your glove!" and waved the leather mitt as the car carrying Tyler began its turn. Had they seen him? The car behind Coach honked, and he had no choice but to advance through the intersection. The red car, having completed its left turn, was now heading away from him, and Coach lost sight of it.

Coach placed the glove on the passenger seat, where he had found it minutes before. He would have to give it to Tyler on Friday. Coach hoped Tyler would be there, the Marauders wouldn't stand a chance against the Sharks without Tyler.