Whenever her daughter got up to bat, Marlene held her breath. There was usually a third grader doing jumping jacks in the outfield, Bobby LaTrobe’s mother yelling to her son as he got ready to pitch, and lots of shuffling around in the dugout with all the Pineville Hospital team kids trying to see what would happen. All this was periphera. With her daughter’s eyes focused and her breathing unsteady, Marlene could sense Annie’s heart whooshing its own irregular exchange of “shush-ah, shush, shhhhh, sha-shush.”

Each time, the pitch seemed to hang cartoon-like in mid-air between ball and strike, waiting for the whim of the umpire, a nurse just off-duty. In those seconds, Marlene watched for the first sign of Annie’s decision: to swing or to wait; to try or to pass; to inhale or to exhale; to will her heart to pump normally or to let the beat swing wildly into the erratic.

What she both wanted and feared was that signal in her daughter’s brain that translated, “Yes, do it!” Sometimes that happened, the bat connecting so perfectly with leather that Marlene could hear her own shout in the clack. Then her daughter would be running, dust scattered by her hand-me-down cleats, her helmet slightly askew, her arms pushing toward home. The specifics of the game were extras. It was her daughter she watched, her thin legs and arms that she applied to baseball terminology. Of course, she cheered as well for the others, but only as melody to her daughter’s harmonious heart murmur, the true music of summer that kept her own life beating.

The doctors had said it was a relatively minor defect, a small hole that might close by itself over time. It pulsed the sound of a waterfall; the louder the noise, the tinier the opening, the less risk. “And, yes, she can play sports,” the pediatric cardiologist had promised. “Overall, the exercise will be good for
her. Just use common sense . . . ." And then he had tugged at his stethoscope and opened the door for them to leave.

"Common sense" was a mystery to Marlene. It seemed mostly to have to do with living a normal life, defined by her husband and children as Little League in this new-to-them small town on a summer evening. Most of the parents worked at the paper mill, some at the two family-owned restaurants, a few at the hospital as nurses or maintenance crew. Her husband, a chemist, coached their son's team, but the games often conflicted, so here she'd sit among strangers in her fold-out sports chair, as close to home plate as the fence would allow, her daughter within yelling distance. At her side, in a somewhat tattered Notre Dame backpack, was often a stack of ungraded middle-school book reports. For these, she'd earn hot dog and hamburger money, a few extra dollars for babysitting the pre-teens condemned to summer school, all of whom, she knew, would be off later to a soccer game or a ballgame like this. That's what she said. What she thought when she deposited the paycheck was "Here was money for the future, her just-in-case fund for doctors in some larger city."

When, a few weeks after their move, the lit survey class had fallen in her lap, she was surprised and ambivalent. Their realtor was the principal's nephew, and he spoke in hushed tones when he told her of the office affair, a teacher's sudden dismissal, the need-to-fill-quickly position. When her husband got his new job, she was prepared for the transition of time off before her own job-hunting. She imagined getting the house in order and going for long walks with the kids that ended up at Dairy Queen. But the early morning teaching got her home by 9:30, her husband off to his slightly adjusted schedule, and free afternoons and evenings for these games. To be honest, teaching children of people she did not yet know wasn't as bad as she expected. It was early enough in the season that she'd invent their names when they elbowed their ways onto the small set of bleachers where she didn't sit. Five of them looked like the parent of her worst student. Despite the high percentage of family relatives in town, in this instance, her common sense prevailed. She smiled at everyone, but stayed in her folding chair.

Except when forced not to. After weeks of avoiding it, one cloudy afternoon, purely by accident and almost after the fact, she found herself signed up for concession stand duty. It was the bottom of the first, and her daughter was in the outfield, looking more at the clouds than the coach, when a twenty-something pregnant woman in a ketchup-stained apron came out of the Ballgame Burgers trailer asking for a "Marley something." When Marlene automatically turned her head, the woman sighed, "This is you, right? Says you're up for duty, and Sis needs a register gal. This you?" and she pointed to a sign-up sheet where Marlene's husband had sometime (who knew when?) scrawled her name.

Of course, she had to go, abandoning the unopened backpack and the folding chair, abandoning a full view of her daughter. She hoped, though, there'd be a spot to watch from the trailer, a side-angle that gave her at least a glimpse
of the game, of her daughter and how she was. She was a worrier; her husband told her this at least once a week, but she couldn’t help but glance back twice as she followed the woman to the trailer. She waved to Annie, then pointed to the shack. Annie waved back and kicked something on the field. At the same time, the other team’s runner stole second.

Inside the food trailer, an older woman with a hair net was barking chicken finger orders to Jason, a thin teen simultaneously working the fryer and rocking his hips to some inner music. His Jesus-Is-the-Great-Physician T-shirt had grease stains and a rip under one arm, but what Marlene could not help noticing first was the cast on his left foot, a cast he seemed completely unaware of as he rocked back and forth, pushing this button and that, flipping a burger on the nearby grill, lowering the fries basket into hot grease.

The older woman, Sis, snapped, “There you are,” and pointed Marlene to the cash register. “Them’s the prices up there,” she nodded at a faded sheet taped on the wall, “and these here are the buttons you push after each item, then at the end.” With a long unpolished fingernail, she tapped first a yellow then a red button. “Think you got it?” She waited for an answer and when Marlene looked into the older woman’s face, she saw she was kind after all. A few strands of gray were peeking out from under the net and falling above tired eyes. Sis swatted them away, but still waited. “Hon?” she prompted.

“Oh, yeah, sure, I think,” Marlene stammered, just as the next person in line ordered two hot dog meals, three soft pretzels, and a large bag of BBQ sunflower seeds. At first she tried to hurry—$2.25 for hot dog meals, $3.50 for hamburger meals, $4.25 for chicken fingers meals, Pepsi or Sierra Mist?—but the numbers got jumbled in her brain, and she’d forget the orders. “Shush-sha, ping, shush, pa”: the register echoed an irregular heart beat, and try as she could, Marlene just couldn’t focus. She kept picturing school charts on how to administer CPR. “There’s a nurse umping,” she told herself and handed back change from a twenty to a guy in a bowling shirt.

It was better when she took a deep breath, slowed down, looked into each customer’s face, and smiled first. She recognized some of them from the bleachers, some from the grocery store. One was a student who sat in the third row back and had written a halfway decent paper on “Casey at the Bat.” He tipped his ball cap. “Hey, Teach,” he smiled, and then ordered a grape Slushie.

The pregnant woman, Jenny Lou, handled most of the drinks, the cheese fries, the soft pretzels, and the candy orders—and anything else when Marlene’s line backed up. For the most part, Sis sided up with Jason on the grill, sizzling burgers and cracking jokes about the local butcher and the high school girls’ track coach. Jason, it seemed, was sweet on one of the runners, at least he blushed at her name, Susie Stanley. Marlene imagined Annie at that age, working the grill at some Little League game, giggling with some boy like Jason who might break her heart. She looked again at his cast, scrawled with the names of friends. Was he the type of kid who looked for danger? Jumping off Hanging
Cliff when the river was low? Or had he merely tripped at a high school race? As she rang up a bag of pretzels, she wondered how much it hurt, if he’d gone to the emergency room.

If there wasn’t much of a line and she stood a few feet to the left of the register, Marlene could see the team at bat. She caught parts of the second and third inning this way, saw Annie walked and then later tagged out at third. She couldn’t see the scoreboard, but customers kept them posted, and her heart sank when, the next time up, Annie struck out. Her daughter hung her head a bit and half-stomped back to the dugout. Marlene imagined her breath in jerks, her heart racing, her lower lip pushed out in disappointment. Then the next batter was up and hit a triple. The kids in the dugout became ecstatic, slapping high-fives and cheering with Annie in the middle of the makeshift huddle, jumping up and down, her pigtail bobbing. The team made two runs after that, then a final out. Understandably, Marlene’s line jammed up again, parents anxious to get their food and get back to the game.

She was busy then for a while, pushing buttons—“Shush-sha, ping”—counting out bills, grabbing cold cans of pop from the freezer. She saw their realtor, now in jeans and a Bud Light T-shirt, and laughed when he did a double-take at her temporary job as cash girl. “Didn’t recognize you without your house,” he chuckled. “My kid is pitching now. Already struck out the neighbor boy. Won’t help the cookout tomorrow.” He laughed again, trying to juggle five Pepsi’s, then wove his way through a group of cheering dads on his way back toward the third base line. He, too, she noticed, avoided the bleachers, heading instead to a large half-circle of folding chairs. She thought she saw the principal in the grouping, but it was hard to distinguish him without his desk and tie. And then there were more orders.

By the time the rush was over, she was starting to get used to the smell of grease, the irregular shush-shush of the cash register, the feel of sticky quarters handed to her by grade-schoolers wanting more baggies of purple gummy bears. Her daughter’s team had gone out and come back from the field, and it was the top of the fourth.

She wiped up some ice tea spilled on the counter, then inched over to the left of the register for a better view. With no one in line now, Jenny Lou joined her, her face flushed, a large circle of sweat on her protruding stomach. “My third,” she smiled and patted her belly. “My first is on your daughter’s team.” Grabbing a piece of ice from the bin and rubbing it across her forehead, she added, “the silly kid with the crew cut—they’ve got him as short stop now.” Marlene wondered how Jenny Lou knew Annie was her daughter, but then remembered how much she must stand out, new substitute teacher in this small town with one of the two girls on the team, her illusion of anonymity fading once again. She picked up her own piece of ice and chewed on it slowly, the sweet cold cooling the back of her throat.
She was just starting to exchange stories with this other woman, the way mothers do when they’ve first met, comparing funny sayings, sports scores, possible family vacations, the cost of clothes these days, the names of pediatricians. Sis and Jason, scraping off the grill, were even joining in on the conversation. “When we were little, we used to go to that doctor on the corner of Oak,” the teen shouted over the hum of the grill fan. “He’d give out sugarless bubblegum if you didn’t cry.” Right after, when the boy smiled wide, Marlene knew that that runner, Susie Stanley, would say “yes” when he asked her to the prom the following year.

Then Annie was up to bat again, and they were all, this whole Baseball Burgers crew, watching together, cheering her on from the trailer, calling out her name. Sis put two fingers in her mouth and whistled the loudest Marlene had ever heard. The first pitch was way over Annie’s head, the second a strike, but the third a straight line, at which Annie pulled back and swung hard, the ball driving fast past third and into the outfield. Marlene was watching the other team scramble for the hit and her daughter charging pell-mell toward first. Her heart, she was sure, worked just right for once. In the rush, she didn’t even see the bat, slung full-force from her daughter’s arm, strike the shortstop squarely on the side. When Jenny Lou gasped, Marlene thought she was excited for Annie. For a moment, she felt she belonged.

Then the child fell back. The nurse/umpire came running, and Marlene and Jenny Lou, faces equally shocked, bolted toward the trailer door and out to the field. By the time they got close, Annie was there too, crying hysterically, bending over her teammate until the nurse shooed her away. Jenny Lou helped her boy up as carefully as she could and huddled him close to her stomach. Another mother immediately called an ambulance.

On their way to the dugout, the boy staggered and nearly fell. Jenny Lou caught him, but called out anyway for help. From the trailer, Jason was already swinging out on crutches, a small bag of ice slung over his shoulder. He and the nurse kicked out the rest of the Pineville Hospital team and made both mother and son sit on the bench. “Give them space to breathe,” Jason ordered like an adult.

The sun had just emerged from the clouds when Marlene and Annie heard the sirens. The boy was better by then, even smiling a bit with his mom, but Marlene and her daughter waited anyway behind the fence until the emergency squad had pulled up on the grass, as close as the driver could get. “Slugger,” the EMS men called to the now-talking boy, “Hey, Attention Grabber,” and then they winked at Annie as they walked by.

“His name is Casey,” she whispered to her mother as the men helped the boy and his mom into the squad car.

After a few minutes, of course, the game went on. It always did. Sis and Jason held down the fort at Baseball Burgers. Marlene hovered near the dugout. Annie went back to first, but never made it further. The next two batters struck
out. The Pineville Hospital kids returned their last time to the outfield, gave up two more runs, but still won the game. Some of the team moms cheered as usual. Some didn’t. A few took their kids to the Dairy Queen afterwards to celebrate.

Marlene and Annie went straight home. They forgot the folding chair and the backpack of ungraded essays, but it didn’t matter. Sis would return everything to them later that night. Marlene was sure of it. She left the porch light on.

The “boys” were still at their own game. Most likely, her husband and son would return with a whoop. They’d pull out the double-chocolate ice cream from the fridge and, between bites, would trade stories of the team’s best plays.

For now, Marlene was glad for the calm. Arm in arm, she and Annie walked upstairs. At the top landing, she pulled her daughter in close under her arm, then tight up against her chest. “Your heart is really racing, Mom,” her daughter looked up and said. “I can hear it. For real.”

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