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BRENT VAN HORNE

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*MURRAY, SWIMMING*

*Murray, in the Army*

When Murray was a senior in high school, he was twenty. I was seventeen and a grade behind him. It had taken me my whole life to be seventeen, and twenty seemed an age where anything could happen. I'd look at Murray and think spectacular things were coming. He seemed ready at any moment to lift off the ground and start flying. I wouldn't have been surprised. I would have waved to him and run along below chasing his shadow as he disappeared behind some clouds or trees or mountains, leaving the land of Nebraska behind and probably finding some fantastic place I'd never heard of.

A year before, Murray joined the Army. That's why he was so old and still in high school. In the middle of his senior year he left. He didn't come from a military family. His father ran a store in town called Cooper's, and his mother had died years earlier. I think it was nostalgia that made him join. Murray wanted to live in a time when a kid from a small town like Burchard could go off and join the Army and be a hero, to live in a time where crowds gathered and cheered wildly for people like that. When we were kids, we learned the only thing more noble than farming was to join the Army and fight. But most of us forgot about that. As we got older we realized they'd changed everything about the world, and you weren't supposed to go round fighting things anymore. But Murray never stopped feeling like that.

So he left for the Army and six months later came home to Burchard and had to start his senior year all over again. He hardly ever talked about what happened while he was gone, and he never went back to the Army, but sometimes we'd be in class or somewhere else trying not to pay attention, and Murray would say to me, "The Army's not the same way it used to be," then he'd shake his head and not say anything for a long time. I think it hurt him to say that, but he had to. It was his way of making sense of why he couldn't be a hero, of why there wasn't anything left he could save. The only thing he seemed to get from the Army was a haircut. Even after he came back he kept the one they gave him, so that year-round Murray's hair was cut nearly to the scalp.

*Murray, and the Falls*

Murray's the only person I've ever known to go over the Falls. The Falls are like a miniature Niagara Falls. You would not believe they could exist in Nebraska, which sometimes seems like a lifeless place. But the Falls are ceaseless. Even people around town have a hard time believing they are out there just past the fields and trees going on and on the way they do. They are impossible to imagine until you see them, as the

drive out of town, over a couple low hills and past some breaks of alder and fir, is dull and underwhelming. But then, as if coming upon the footprint of some ancient giant, the land drops quickly away and Salem Creek turns a corner and heads right over the edge. All the Falls are is a few drop-offs along the fattest part of the creek, but the drop is twenty-five feet or more, and a steady roll of water pours off the edge.

What had happened was Murray's father died. All of this was after he got back from the Army, during his last year in school. His father had been on the ground fumbling with a pin on the hitch of his tractor when something with the gears went wrong and the tractor rolled onto his chest. He suffocated finally is what they said, and I could never think about it very long without feeling awful and horrified and mad that people can die like that, or that people die at all.

*Murray, Playing Baseball*

In Burchard the men from around town play baseball on Sunday nights. It's a strange thing really, to see grown men who were built for things like throwing hay bales and putting up fences out on a baseball diamond. But it was beautiful too, and Murray got to be a part of those Sunday games. I'd go and watch him all the time. He was the only kid still in high school they ever let play.

The men played baseball the way I thought it should be played. For them it wasn't about talent. It was about effort. You could see they were trying in everything they'd do. A guy would hit a slow ground ball to third base and run it out grunting, knock-kneed, and stumbling toward first base as if the game had been created only for that one moment to exist. When a guy like that made it everyone cheered wildly, and when he didn't we cheered about the same. Murray was that way too. That's why they let him play I guess. He wasn't a big guy, but he was a very good ballplayer. He made plays in left field that made you reconsider what a guy could do out there. He moved to his right and left as quick as anyone and had a way about feeling out where a ball would be hit so that before the batter swung, Murray would be leaning this way or that way. And he was almost always right.

He was good at the plate too. He didn't hit it deep, but he found gaps. He'd sneak it between the third baseman and the shortstop, then leg out a double while the left fielder wasn't looking. He'd steal too. He was twenty years old, but he moved like a child. There was an airiness about him, as if his legs and arms never learned to slow down. He moved as if it was the first time he'd ever run, and I would sit and watch and feel as though I were looking at something so magnificent it might disappear if I turned away.