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Big House Rain

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Big House Rain

The score is 28-24, Ohio State's lead. There are six minutes to play. It is cold and wet, and a fine mist is making everyone's coats and hair shine in the stadium lights. It is nearly 6:00 p.m. now, and the sky is dark except for the Goodyear Blimp. Next to me, Dave is yelling something about getting the ball down the field. Dave got us good tickets — 50-yard line or so, row 30. At least he got us in the Michigan section this year—two years ago, we ended up encased by Ohio State fans. But tonight, everyone in our section is wearing a mad combination of maize and blue. Mist keeps collecting on my hood and then rolling off onto my face, down the side of my forehead, right into my contacts, making everything a blur of green.

I am wearing a rainjacket from the Gap. It is cute, yellow, and definitely not warm enough for this weather. But it keeps out the rain. I zip the zipper on my raincoat almost to the beginning of my neck, even though I know I look less cute with it zipped that high. Suddenly everyone is yelling and I've missed something. I look up and Donovan has bobbed a pass and then dropped it. Fourth down, punt. Next to me, Dave grunts, and to his left, Ivan sighs. We just met Ivan—Michigan student.

There's 4:46 left. Ohio State has a strong offense this year. I have my hands in my raincoat pockets, and my left hand is playing with an old church bulletin I had ripped into little strips of paper.

3:15. One of the OSU coaching assistants is actually running around, packing things up. The church bulletin is in little sweaty wads now. We have to win because the national championship is finally being held at Pasadena again. My

parents have promised to fly me out there if Michigan gets to the Rose Bowl. Which means we have to be number one or number two. Which means we have to win this game.

Ohio State cuts right, and Hinken gets a three-yard gain. Second down, seven to go. I am watching, but not watching. I am thinking about the Rose Parade, about cartfuls of red and pink and yellow roses spilling out into California streets. The Rose Bowl has fascinated me since I was eleven, back when Rose Bowl meant the power struggle between the Big Ten and the Pac Ten. Back then the Rose Bowl only meant a pseudo-Macy's Parade. On New Year's Day, I'd watch the parade and then assemble a 500-piece puzzle. Sometime in late junior high, I'd stopped after the edges and started watching plays. In high school, the puzzles didn't leave the closet.

Someone has just caught a screen pass—Perry, I think. Yeah, 41. Ohio State is on the 43-yard line. Silver trombones and trumpets flash on the sideline, playing a victory theme I've heard but don't know the name of. Suddenly the headache that's been behind my eyes the whole game is moving toward the center of my head. There is one pain that streaks down through the bridge of my nose when I turn too far left. I feel a little dizzy.

"Dave, I'm gonna sit down." Dave squeezes the back of my bicep on my nerve. "Ouch, jerk."

Dave lets go, elbowing me. "Don't be a wimp. I can't believe you're talking about sitting and stuff. See that? Three minutes."

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I rub my muscle. “I know, but man, my head hurts.” Dave shrugs. I step off the bench and start to sit when my right shoulder collides with a pom-pom. A man in a Michigan alumni parka turns.

“Sorry hon! I musta got a little enthusiastic there.”

My head is splitting in two, but I grin and throw my fist in the air. “Hail to the victors!” He turns back to the game and swears as Cragey, OSU’s best running back, gains four more yards. I sit down and lean forward until my head is resting on my jeans. The denim smells like popcorn and hot dogs and cigarettes.

I am listening, eyes closed, to the game. It feels good because it is dark and cool. I can still feel rain dropping on the back of my hood. I listen to the sound of noisemakers, the trumpets, the Nikes of the alumni guy stomping on pavement.

Then there is a rushing sound, the sharp intake of breath from our bleachers, then a roar. Next to me, Dave screams. I open my eyes and the stadium lights pierce the left side of my head. Squinting, I turn to Dave. “What happened?”

“Interception,” he yells. “Right into Dirgen’s hands.”

“I told you he was the next Woodson.” I give Dave a slippery hug, our raincoats sliding against each other. Then thousands and thousands of keys are dancing, clanging in the rain. Key play. I feel for my left pocket, unbuttoned. I find my car keys with my thumb and pull them out, then put them back. The banging is in step with the banging in my head, and I don’t want to make it worse. 0:25. The Michigan offensive lines up at the 35-yard line. My hand wraps around my keys, pressing little ridges into my palm, and I push my will through the headache. *Score, score.*

Then the pass. It's too far out to the right and glides over Hensley's hands and out of bounds. Next to me, the guy in the alumni parka curses and throws the pom-pom onto the ground. He sees me watching him and shrugs.

0:18. Charets drops back, going for the long pass, but they blitz too fast, and he lobs it to the fullback, who pounds it out of bounds at the 31. 0:11. Third down.

Every noisemaker in the place is going. The rain, which let up for a few minutes, comes down in torrents. I can barely see anything. I pull the cord in my raincoat hood tighter around my head and lean forward. Voices raise, distort in the rain. I grab Dave's arm and squeeze until my left palm hurts because the Rose Bowl and the title and everything depends on this play.

There's the snap. I barely see it because there is so much rain in my eyelashes. My left hand still squeezes, and my right hand shields my eyes. Charets goes back, back, back. Then he throws it—a long, crisp bullet right through the rain and the shouting and the night air. It seems to fly forever, a streak of brown silver caught in stadium lights. And I stand on the tip of my toes, and I stop yelling because I'm afraid to break its perfect flight. Down, down, and Neltzen catches it.

I gasp then with Dave and Ivan and alumni guy because Neltzen slips. He is several yards from the nearest defender, but he slips. His right hand is going down. "No!" Dave and I yell in unison.

Then, and I can't even believe it, he recovers. He snatches up his free hand before it touches the field, and he's off. There is a defender directly on his right but he darts around him and starts running. He has three more defenders to pass, but two

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slip and the last makes one tripping dive and Neltzen is home free. I can't hear anything because the roar of the crowd is so loud. He's at the 40-yard line...30...25.

And then something slams me hard in the side, and I fall into Dave. He doesn't notice because now Neltzen is at the 15 and still going. I turn and see the alumni guy slumped onto my right shoulder. And I realize that there is red everywhere – all over my jeans and on the sleeve of my yellow Gap raincoat. And at first I think it's ketchup or V8 or something, but I have seen this color before. All I can think about is two weeks ago, when I cut my hand on barbed wire and bled all over my jeans. At first I think it's me, but then I remember the alumni guy, and I look at his stomach, and there is red leaking out.

I think I stop breathing. But then the yells crescendo. Time's up and the score is 30-28. We've won. Beside me, Dave jumps up and down screaming with Ivan. I don't want to look at alumni guy so I look at the ground. The pom-pom is covered with blood. I tell myself that I have vivid dreams sometimes, but I still feel his body slouched against my arm, and I feel very, very sick.

It takes me a few seconds to realize I'm screaming, because everyone is screaming. Then it hits me that if someone shot this guy, they might shoot me. I start turning around in a blur of rain and blue and yellow looking for a gun. And all I see is fans and more fans and more fans, and they are all smiling and laughing and high-fiving. Somewhere there's a gun, and I want to hide under the bleachers, out from under this body. "Someone help me!"

I'm screaming again and again, and no one hears me. I know nothing about nursing or bullet wounds, but I find the man's wrist and try to feel a pulse. I can't find one, but I think it's because my hand is shaking so hard.

My hand is still on the man's wrist, trying desperately to find the right vein when Dave turns to give me a hug. "We won!" Then he looks, *looks* at me. "What's on your pants?" Then...the man, the bullet hole, the blood. "Oh...oh no...oh no...what, what is this, what's going on?"

"I don't know." My voice seems calm. "I...I just turned and...and he was like this. I can't tell if he's alive." I shiver.

"Who did this?" Dave grabs my arm, squeezing too.

"I...I don't know. He just... slumped over or something." Dave releases my left arm, and it won't stop shaking. My right arm has blood all over it. I think I have antibacterial lotion from Bath and Body works in my purse. Juniper Breeze. I try to unzip my purse but my hands are shaking and slipping with blood.

"Did this just happen...why...why didn't you tell me?" Suddenly there is a gasp and a scream as the woman a row ahead of us sees the man. Soon others are screaming. Ivan is yelling something.

"I tried. You...you didn't hear anything." The purse is finally unzipped. I pull out the antibacterial lotion and I rub it methodically, all over my hands. It makes a mess of lotion and blood.

"What are you doing?" Dave is screaming a few feet from my face. He is grabbing the edge of my raincoat now, pulling me away from the body. I feel the

man slip down my arm and his skull hit the bench with a sharp clang. I start rubbing anti-bacterial lotion on my raincoat sleeve. I don't look at Dave.

"I am using my...my Bath and Body...my anti-bacterial lotion," I say, trying to breathe slowly. Dave rips the lotion container out of my hands and throws it down three aisles.

"Get a hold of yourself!" He is shaking me now, so hard I bite my tongue and taste blood. I taste blood everywhere.

Ivan punches Dave, who finally lets go of me. "I'm getting the police!" He takes the stairs three at a time. He has long legs.

I gag blood onto the section of metal bench that now separates me from the body. Dave has stopped yelling. He takes my arm and pulls me closer. "Are you okay?"

I swallow. I feel a trickle of rain go down the top of my ear and then drip off the lobe onto my shoulder. Then I nod, slowly.

"Did you see anything? Hear it? The gunshot? Are you hurt?"

I feel very, very tired. The band is still playing; people ten sections over are laughing and drinking beers. Everyone in my section is running up the stairs to the exit or standing and staring at me and the man beside me. "I...I'm fine. I didn't hear anything. He just...fell."

It has started raining again, and there is one rivulet of blood running down the center groove of the bench. I am watching it swim towards me. His face. It's still lying on the bench. He looks cold. I start to unzip my jacket so he can wear it. He

has a goatee, just like my uncle Jim. He has good teeth too. His mouth is slightly open.

There are shouts now, and policemen are starting to run down the stairs. Dave is still holding my arm, and now I lean all my weight against him. And I relax every part of my body and pretend that I didn't see a dead man, that he didn't fall on me. I relax my muscles in my ankle, then the muscles in my calves, my thighs, my abs. My mom taught me to do that when I used to have insomnia in junior high. It helped me sleep.

I hear the pounding of police shoes running down concrete stairs. I can judge by the sound that they are at aisle 170, then maybe 110, and then 60, then my row. They take loud steps. My eyes are still closed. I hear the police picking up the dead man and taking him away. Then one steps closer to me.

"Is she okay?"

I breathe in Dave's shirt. It smells like Tide with wet grass. Dave elbows me. "Yes, she's okay. Carrie?"

I don't respond. My eyes are shut and nothing has ever happened. Dave elbows me again. "I think she may have fainted."

I hear the sound of a siren, far off, at the bottom of the stadium. The medic is picking up my wrist, feeling my pulse. He lets it go, and it drops heavily. I am good at this. When I was little, my older brother used to sneak into my room. He checked to see if I was sleeping by lifting my arm. I learned to make it fall like dead weight.

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“Yes, she’s definitely fainted. We’ll need to take her to the hospital to have her checked out.” Dave and the medics are picking me up. I feel strong cloth beneath me, a stretcher. I am limp.

I’m not conscious, I tell myself. I’m not in Ann Arbor, Michigan. In my mind, I am sitting in my best friend’s church singing a song about love and Bethlehem, watching light hit pastel stained glass, and everything is pastel, and nothing is red, red, red.

The stairs take a long time. I will be in an ambulance soon. A loud voice. “Sir, did your friend see anything?”

“No, she didn’t,” I hear Dave answer. “Do you know...do you know what happened?”

“No.” The man is already walking away, talking to the other officers.

“That’s okay,” Dave sighs. Somewhere in the stadium someone yells “Michigan rules!” And someone pounds their feet on the pavement. The band is playing the Star Wars theme, and the last thing I remember thinking as we leave the stadium is that my headache is gone.