

M.C. Allan

The Umpire

In the sixth inning, Tanya starts walking batters. They keep going around the bases, one after the other shuffling through the startling May heat. She even walks Courtney Ball, who's only nine, thin as a splinter, and usually swings at everything. But the other coach yells, "Watch the ball, Courtney, you don't have to swing," and Courtney stands, shifting nervously as the balls go by, and finally scurries down to first base when the umpire points.

Kelly watches from the dugout as Tanya sits down on the mound and starts crying—first sobbing heavily, then just sitting, her head buried in her knees, her arms wrapped around them. The down on Kelly's arms rises and prickles, as it does whenever she is around something intensely embarrassing.

From the third base line, Coach McDonough calls Tanya. He's not allowed to go to the mound. It's a new rule: too many coaches were stalling, hanging out on the mound to delay they were winning so that the league time limit would kick in. Now a pitcher has to come to the base line to talk, but Tanya's not moving.

Coach McDonough comes back, his face flushed and irritated. Kelly's mom, the team's assistant coach, is leaning against the dugout wall holding the clipboard with the lineup sheet. Coach McDonough says something in her ear. Kelly's mom walks onto the field. "Tanya ... honey, will you come talk to us?"

Tanya's voice, muffled by her arms: "I want my dad."

Coach McDonough peers hopefully out at the bleachers, but Tanya's parents never come to games. His chest deflates, making him look like the other dads. Normally he looks like the guy on the packet of Big League Chew—big jaw, cleft

chin, meaty ham-pink face.

“They’re not here,” he says to Kelly’s mom.

“Tanya, sweetheart, you don’t have to pitch anymore,” Kelly’s mom calls. Tanya starts sobbing again.

Coach McDonough pats Kelly’s mom on the shoulder. “You tried, babe,” he says.

Out on the mound, the second base ump squats down next to Tanya, talking quietly. Bees dive-bomb the trash can near the bleachers, investigating sticky rivulets of grape slushee and the remnants of hot dogs. The outfielders sit down in the grass, waiting. Kelly’s glad her wrist is sprained; otherwise she’d be out with them, sweating and inhaling gnats. She is not the worst player on the team, but she’s no star. She hates grounders, the way they skip over the stony infield dirt, ready to catch a pebble and shoot up at her face. Last season she’d dropped a fly ball that cost them the game, and for weeks afterward she could feel the team’s collective resentment. She wouldn’t trade places with Tanya for anything right now.

Out on the mound, the umpire—the one everyone calls Mr. Phil—keeps talking to Tanya. His shirt is blue with sweat under his arms and pulls up at the back of his pants. Kelly hopes it won’t come loose; she doesn’t want to see his butt crack. She digs into her packet for more strings of gum to add to her wad. Mr. Phil takes off his cap and wipes the sweat from his brow. There’s a pink indentation on his bald head from the hat.

There’s a burst of kicked-up gravel and shouting behind the dugout as some boys in Henderson Hardware’s maroon jerseys run by with squirt guns. Kelly scuffs her cleats against the concrete floor and watches tiny dust storms circulate around them.

On the bleachers, parents shuffle and murmur. She hears Dr. Danvers say to his wife, “That girl is so high strung.” His daughter Katie is the team’s best pitcher, but Coach put her at second today to give Tanya a turn. Now Katie’s toss-

ing her glove up and catching it, over and over. Smug cheerfulness radiates around her with the heat shimmer. She's mean, but she's the best pitcher, and Dr. Danvers is the head vet at Langley Animal Hospital, their sponsor, whose name is on their yellow jerseys.

Out on the mound, Mr. Phil keeps talking. It's weird how pink his mouth is, like he's been drinking cherry slushee, like Mr. Potato Head with Mrs. Potato Head's lips.

Tanya lifts her head. Her face is red, but Mr. Phil smiles, and she gets up slowly, brushes at her uniform, and picks up the ball. She nods to the home plate umpire. A scattering of applause runs through the stands.

Through the dugout window, Kelly can see Dr. Danvers rolling his eyes.

§

After the game Kelly and her mom help Coach McDonough carry the bulky burlap bags of helmets to his truck. They run into Mr. Phil in the parking lot. "If it isn't the miracle worker," Coach McDonough says, setting down the bag.

"Yeah, honestly," her mom says. "What did you say to her, Mr. Phil?"

Mr. Phil grins. "I just told her to buck up," he says. His eyes are big and pale blue behind his glasses, like the eyes of their neighbor's Weimaraner. Kelly can smell his sweat—not a stink, exactly, a dirt smell, but tangy. She hasn't noticed the smell of anyone but her parents before.

He sees her sniffing. "I'm ripe. Sorry," he grins, plucking his wet shirt away from his skin. Kelly looks away.

"That's all?" Coach says, shaking his head. "I don't think I've got the touch. I need to go back to the fourteen-and-ups."

"Why weren't you playing today?" Mr. Phil asks Kelly.

"I sprained my wrist," she says, holding it out. Then she

feels stupid: the splint was taken off the day before; her wrist looks perfectly normal.

“Looks OK to me,” Mr. Phil says. “You sure Coach didn’t bench you for partying?”

Kelly knows he’s teasing but can’t imagine how to tease back. His eyes are too blue. She shrugs and looks at her mother. “Can I get a drink?”

“We’ve got lots to drink at home,” her mom says, but Kelly can tell she wants to stay and talk.

“I’ll go fast,” Kelly says, and sprints. She wants to show Mr. Phil how fast she runs—it feels like she’s an insect or something, like barely any weight at all. The first and second diamonds whip by and she hits the snack bar steps two at a time. She pays for a soda and starts jogging back, careful so it won’t splosh. She sees Mr. Phil coming towards her. He says, “Hey, number 12.”

“Hey,” she says.

“I hope your wrist gets better. They need you in left.”

“No they don’t,” she says. “No one hits that far in this league. They just stick people there so they can’t mess things up too bad.”

He raises his eyebrows. “I hope your wrist gets better anyway.”

She waggles her hand. It hurts a little, shaking it, but she doesn’t wince.

“See you,” he says, and turns to go.

“Hey,” she says to his back. “What’d you say to Tanya?”

He turns. She feels a flutter of power: she has made an adult, almost a stranger, stay to talk to her.

His pink lips twitch. “I told you guys,” he says.

“Yeah, but that wasn’t it. You said more than that. Anyway, no one stops crying just ‘cause someone tells them to.”

He shifts, smirks. “I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

He looks toward the parking lot. Kelly’s mom’s in the car,

the window rolled down, still talking to Coach. “Cause, number 12, everyone wants to be an umpire. Lousy pay, angry parents, crying kids. Everyone wants my job. I gotta keep some tricks up my sleeve.”

“I won’t tell.”

“Kelly!” Her mom is calling.

“Promise?” he says. His eyes are serious, though he looks like he’s going to laugh. She nods. “I told her to get up so that little bitch Katie Danvers wouldn’t get to pitch.”

Her mom honks the horn. Kelly doesn’t know what to say. She flaps her hand goodbye and runs, splashing soda on her uniform pants. She slows near Mr. Phil’s car: small, rust near the wheel wells. There are CDs on the passenger seat, a band called Creedence Clearwater Revival. The singer looks like one of the apostles in pictures from Sunday school.

In the car on the way home, Kelly crunches the ice cubes from the soda between her teeth and watches the neighborhoods roll by: green lawns, maple sparrows in a birdbath. She has a small scrape on her knuckles she can’t remember getting.

“Kelly, what’s going on with Tanya?” Mom asks.

“I think her parents are getting divorced,” Kelly says. “I really don’t know her except for softball.” They turn into their driveway. “How old is Mr. Phil?”

“I don’t know, honey. Maybe early thirties?”

“He’s bald.”

Her mom laughs. “That’s doesn’t mean anything. When I met Dad in college, he was already balding. It’s a hormone thing.”

They’ve been talking about hormones in health class. They show a lot of pictures of people’s insides and a creepy cartoon where these little bubbly hormones fizz around the shape of a girl and suddenly boobs and hips and pubic hair pop out.

Kelly’s mom turns off the radio and cuts the engine. “Does Tanya have a lot of friends at school?”

“I don’t know. She’s in the grade under me,” Kelly says, getting out and leaning against the car. Her mom unlocks the door and the coolness of the house slides over them. “Why does everyone call him Mr. Phil?”

Her mom shrugs. “I don’t know. How’s your wrist?”

“Better. Can I listen to some of your records?”

Kelly’s parents have Paul Anka, they have South Pacific, they have five Simon and Garfunkels, they have the Bee Gees and Joe Cocker and tons more vinyls lined up under the stereo. She has to flip through fifty albums before she finds Creedence Clearwater Revival. She takes it to her room. She has to move some books off the record player because she hardly uses it anymore—her only records are kid stuff, *The Story of Thumbelina* and *Winnie the Pooh*. She sits in bed reading the lyrics on the whispery paper sleeve.

She plays the record again and again until her dad comes in to call her to dinner. He starts singing in his actor voice and the hair on her arms stands up; she leaps out of bed to shut off the record. She feels like he’s caught her at something. She used to like his singing, but lately she finds it embarrassing.

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Over the next few days, she listens to the record whenever she can. She listens until she can hear “Who’ll Stop the Rain” all through math class. She mouths it silently through lunch and gym, when the mile run takes her breath, but she makes her feet take a step for each syllable, using the song to pace herself.

And—I—won—der—still— I—won—der—who’ll—
stop—the—rain.

Listening to this music she feels older, like she’s sitting alone on a weathered porch, watching a downpour. There’s a fullness in it; she feels as though it’s opened a door. Her reg-

ular face, brushing her teeth in the mirror, surprises her.

One day Mr. Phil is part of the scenery like the unused scoreboard in right field and the blue tarps rolled up along the dugouts for thunderstorms. Then suddenly he's everywhere. It's like after that day—after he told her what he said about Katie, after she listened to his music—she can suddenly see him.

She watches him when he isn't looking. When she goes to bat, she hopes for a double so she can stop at second. Standing on second puts her in front of where he stands to umpire, and the whole time she can feel him behind her.

He tries to make her laugh: "Hey, number 12, been out drinking again?" "That's quite a tobacco wad you got, slugger."

"It's gum, stupid," she says, and sticks out her tongue to prove it, the pink, teeth-marked gob halfway stretched around it, glistening with spit.

§

Between games, school is school: the restlessness of near summer, dull mustard lockers and the chicken nugget smell that saturates the afternoons. In biology, Mrs. Hunter dissects the frog that has been living in the tank in the classroom.

She splays it out on a board with pins and then removes its organs one by one, explaining the function of each.

Kelly stands at the back of the group gathered to watch. "That is so rad," Chris Connors whispers to Aaron Hayes as she holds up a tiny stomach.

"Wait till we get to high school," says Aaron. Kelly can just see the lab table between them, where Mrs. Hunter probes the stomach with a scalpel and something pale green seeps out. "In high school, my brother told me, everyone gets their own."

"Their own? Like, alive?"

“They paralyze them first,” Aaron says. “But everyone gets their own body.”

Kelly looks at the frog’s organs. Alive, the frog had been a sullen, defiant presence that sulked with her through class, half submerged in the greenish water. Now it’s a disassembled frog, an ex-frog, spread out beneath a poster of a diagrammed frog, names of organs floating around the drawing. She’d looked at the frog every day before class. She probably knew it better than she knew anyone else in the class—they were all just a blur of Neil’s freckles and Lisa’s pierced ears and Deepak’s curls and Sherry’s acne and Tina’s long eyelashes. For a moment she pictures all of them without their skins and faces and hair, all pink and stringy underneath.

§

To make the clocks move faster, she dreams about Mr. Phil, awake-dreams that skip along her eyeballs like flat pebbles on a lake: plunk, plunk, then they sink in and she can’t stop seeing them.

That Katie, she thinks she’s so great, he says.

She’s a good pitcher. In her daydreams she is nicer, more generous.

Not that good. She just gets to pitch ‘cause of her father.

She says Chris Connors likes her.

He would. He’s shallow. And he was held back a grade.

Sometimes she imagines he’s there when she hits a home-run or makes an impossible catch. He never cheers, just smiles, as if to say he knows how sweet it is when the ball hits the glove just right, sending a puff of leathery dust into the air. Sometimes she and Mr. Phil are on the same team, playing outfield. They are there when the guy from the Big League Chew packet gets up to bat, grinning and scuffing his cleats. They hear the crack of the bat and see the ball going way, way up and far, and then, in one fluid motion,

Mr. Phil lifts Kelly onto his shoulders and she reaches up and snags the ball, and everyone in the bleachers gasps.

Kelly can see all of this—him grabbing her, lifting her onto his shoulders, her holding on with her legs and stretching out above him. She always pictures it happening on Field 4, because that’s the field where the afternoon light comes in best, so when he lifts her onto his shoulders, the light makes them into one, like a centaur or something no one’s imagined yet.

§

At night, Langley Field radiates white light into the neighborhoods. The floodlights at the field are so powerful that when they get turned on, Kelly can actually hear the thunk as the surge of electricity hits them, just as she’s wheeling her bike into the woods above the bleachers. Mr. Phil’s car is in the lot. There’s not much of a path and branches snag at her hair, but she can survey the park without being seen.

She spots him behind the plate on Field 2, calling pitches for a boys’ game, Mr. Sandwich against Henderson Hardware. She stashes her bike behind the snack bar then checks the stands. Coach Smith is watching his son from the Mr. Sandwich side. He knows Kelly because of her mother, but he won’t try to make conversation. She strides out and climbs up the struts and slides up next to him.

He nods to her and keeps watching the game. The Henderson batter at the plate swings and misses, and Mr. Phil’s voice rings out, “Strike!”

“Kelly! What happened to you?” Coach Smith’s wife appears at the bottom of the bleachers, her arms loaded with food. “You have leaves and twigs all in your hair!”

Kelly runs her hands over her hair, pulling the leaves out. She can feel herself flush. Out of the corner of her eye she sees Mr. Phil step back from the plate and take off his mask. She hopes he didn’t hear Mrs. Smith, who’s squealed loud

enough for people at the snack bar to hear. Her mom's friends always comment on Kelly's grubbiness or scabby knees, as though they're things she should have outgrown. Lately—worse—they're saying, "You've grown so much!" This used to mean she'd grown taller, but now it means she's getting boobs, and she doesn't know how to answer: Thanks Mrs. Dietrich, yours are nice too?

Kelly doesn't want anyone to notice she's grown. She just wants Mr. Phil to think she plays well and runs fast and is pretty under her messy hair. And sometimes she thinks she wants him to want to kiss her, but just to want to kiss her, not to actually kiss her because she doesn't get how he'd do it so it's not dry like her dad's on her forehead and not gross like movies where it's like one two three four I declare a tongue war. It would be enough to know that Mr. Phil wanted to kiss her, wanted a kiss like that perfect catch when the ball smacks into the glove with just enough speed that it hurts a little, the catch so good it deserves the orange sun behind it.

Mrs. Smith hands a bag of popcorn up to Coach Smith, then a chili dog. She hefts herself up onto the bleachers. She is not fat, but like most grownups, she seems to be burdened with weight. Her shorts slide up her thighs as she sits down; her thighs sag against the bleachers like tired dachshunds.

Looking down surreptitiously at her legs and droop of belly, Kelly thinks, how could Mrs. Smith imagine, anymore, how to leap up and catch a ball out of the air? Or to understand that if you didn't catch it, it could keep going, over the fence, into the storm pipe and the creek beyond, where it would rot, covered in algae? Kelly feels like that sometimes, like she's one person when she goes to sleep and then sleep decays her, makes her someone else. Just when she gets used to the new self it happens again. If it keeps happening, who will recognize her? Her thoughts feel too big for her body. But her body is too big for some of her thoughts. She could wake up a few

sleeps from now and look like Mrs. Smith, and who knows what Mrs. Smith thinks or feels, except tired, which is what all adults say when someone asks how they are: Fine. A little tired.

“You girls aren’t playing tonight,” Mrs. Smith says, sucking the straw of her soda. “What are you doing here?”

Kelly shrugs. “Just watching.”

“You’re watching the game?” Mrs. Smith seems baffled, but then understanding floods across her face. She leans in conspiratorially. “Which boy?”

Kelly wants to smother her with her chili dog, but she doesn’t turn from the game. “Boys are gross,” she says. Mr. Phil’s back is dark with sweat.

Mrs. Smith prods her husband with her straw. He doesn’t turn his head from the game either. “You think that now,” she says to Kelly knowingly. “You just wait—I thought that, too, at your age. Although I was an early bloomer, wasn’t I, Bill.” Coach Smith blushes.

On the field the next pitcher warms up his arm and Mr. Phil stands near the fence, talking to a mother lower in the bleachers. He glances up and sees Kelly. He says, “Hey number 12.” A couple of people turn around to see who he’s talking to, and she nods back: just a fan checking out the game, nodding to her buddy the umpire.

All the way home—she pedals so fast she nearly spins out on the gravel patch at the bottom of Wrightson—she feels triumphant about that nod.

§

On Thursday when they play SuperMovieHouse, Mr. Phil talks a lot to Kelly’s mom between innings. While the pitchers warm up and the fielders throw the ball around, he keeps coming over. He sets his soda on the ledge of their dugout, sipping it at breaks, joking with Kelly’s mom and Coach McDonough.

Kelly stands taking practice swings, cutting the air like a tree. She watches the grownups horsing around, and she feels the fullness of their world, how it hovers around them like those clouds of gnats in the outfield. Mr. Phil makes her mom laugh, and Coach McDonough squirts her with a water bottle. Kelly glares at them. She is practicing her glare; she wants it strong enough to burn the backs of people's heads. She stares at her mother and wills her with sheer glare-force to stop giggling.

Her mom doesn't stop, but Mr. Phil turns to talk to the home plate ump and sees her. She slices her bat through the air as he walks over. She makes herself keep looking at him; it feels like her eyeballs are scraping his.

"Hey number 12."

"My name is Kelly," she says.

"Oh yeah?" he says. "So I should stop calling your mom Mrs. 12?"

Her mouth wants to smile but she resists. She rolls the bat between her hands. "You shouldn't flirt with my mom like that."

His mouth opens. "I'm flirting?"

"I'm not stupid."

"Huh. And why shouldn't I flirt?"

Kelly has a reason ready. "Cause you're the umpire. People will think you're biased for our team." She can see he wants to laugh and it makes her mad.

"It's just joking around," he says. "People can do that, you know—joke around, flirt if you want to call it that. It doesn't mean anything."

She considers this. In her experience, every interaction has meaning. The idea that this will not always be the case, that one day she will "joke around" and tickle people and squirt water on them and it will mean nothing seems absurd, another adult lie, like the arbitrary dates her parents have for when she's allowed to do certain things: earrings when you're sixteen, skydiving when you're twenty-one and can

pay for it.

The home ump calls over, "Let's get this show on the road."

Mr. Phil nods. "We okay then, number 12?" he says.

She swivels her bat slowly. "I guess."

"Good," he says, his grin returning as he heads for second base. "So don't act jealous. I still like you best."

Kelly's whole body turns hot. All around him is a blur of green SuperMovieHouse uniforms and the thunderous thumping as the girls in the field turn and throw their practice balls into the concrete dugout.

§

She thinks about him so much it makes her stomach hurt. She thinks about her mom saying baldness is caused by hormones and she pictures the little pulsing circles from the health class cartoon skittering around Mr. Phil like haloes polishing his head. She thinks about how her dad is bald on his head but how his chest and legs have hair on them. She wonders if Mr. Phil's do, and thinking about it makes her stomach turn over like when she rides her bike down Wrightson Avenue and doesn't brake: a sickening curl of descent.

Before dinner on Saturday she sits on the patio steps, reading, watching fireflies switch on and off under the trees. She hears her mom answering the phone inside as she tries to decipher the French sentences in her book. Her mom is telling someone when their next game is, but her voice sounds strange, like she's not sure: Tuesday at five, field three. "Sure ... yeah ... just a minute," her mother says, and then she pushes open the screen door and hands Kelly the phone. "Don't stay on too long."

Kelly mouths, Who? Her mother shrugs, like she knows but doesn't get it.

"Hello?"

“Hey number 12.”

“Oh. . . Hi.” Kelly stands up from the step.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing. Reading.” The snack bar at the field has a bulletin board hung with printouts of the game lineups. Anyone can read them. Why did he call?

“What are you reading?”

“Something for French.” Kelly walks up the back steps, back down and into the yard. If she stops moving she will freeze in place.

“Ah, lemme guess. No Camus for a few years. Le Petit Prince?” His accent is good and she imagines Madame Walsch saying, Tres bien, Monsieur Phil.

“Yeah. How’d you know that?”

“Hey, I went to Eisenhower,” he says. “They made us read all of that stuff.”

“Oh.” Silence. She keeps waiting for him to say, So the reason I wanted to talk to you is, but he doesn’t.

“What kind of music do you like?”

She tells him that she likes U2 and Green Day and Creedence Clearwater—“You like CCR?” he says. His voice lights up.

“Yeah, they’re awesome.” She reminds herself to call them CCR from now on.

“What’s your favorite song?”

“I like ‘Who’ll Stop the Rain,’ ” she says, and she suddenly realizes that he has not called to ask her mother about the softball schedule. He has called to talk to her. Not just that, the conversation with her mother was a cover. Her stomach rolls over hard, coiling up like a fat hot snake.

“Yeah, that’s a good one. I like ‘Fortunate Son.’ Those opening riffs are just mean.”

Opening riffs. Mean. Kelly turns the words in her mouth like a butterscotch. No one has ever asked what she thinks about music, or been happy to like what she likes. She wants to tell him about the feeling she gets from that song, of rain

coming down warm and sad, but she fears sounding stupid and maybe he knows already.

“So how old are you, anyway?” he says.

“I’ll be thirteen in two weeks,” she says, and he laughs.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. I just think you’re cool.”

“How old are you?”

“I’ll be 34 in four months.”

Silence.

“I like ‘Down on the Corner,’ too,” she says, to fill it.

“So,” he says, “do you want to come over to the field?”

“Why?” she blurts.

“Well, I don’t know. We could hang out.”

She can’t believe he has said this. She looks at her bike; the kickstand is broken and the bike lies on its side. She could be at the field in five minutes. The ease of it is terrifying. “Um, we’re going to eat soon.”

“You’re nearby, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I could meet you.”

“Yeah.” She pictures him kissing her. How would she do it? She presses her lips quickly against the back of her hand, trying to make them soft and strong.

“So?”

In her head, Kelly can see the path from the field’s parking lot down to the creek. There’s a huge storm drain under the road even a tall person can stand in. It’s dark and hidden and the water echoes and shimmers. Kelly catches minnows there. Used to catch minnows there. He’ll know where it is.

“Yeah, okay,” she says. It is resolved. She’s going.

“You’re coming now?”

“Yeah.”

She bites her lips gently to get the blood redden them. She thinks what lie to tell her mother to get away. She puts her hand on her bicycle’s back wheel and sets it spinning. She can hear his breath and then he says, “So who are your

teachers at Eisenhower?”

The only one she can think of who’s pretty old is Mr. Slater. He’s tall and skinny and has this scrap of gray hair that he combs over the top of his bald spot. He tells bad jokes

and wants to be called Captain Slater because he was in the military years ago. “I have Captain Slater for math.”

“That guy’s still teaching? We all hated him,” he says. “Some of my friends slashed his tires when we were in 8th grade.”

“Yeah, I liked him at first but now I hate him. He’s one of those fakers who acts like he’s all cool but he’s totally anal.” This sounds good; she’s heard older kids describe their parents as anal.

“Whoa—anal,” he laughs. “You like CCR and you know psychology.”

She doesn’t know what he means, but he seems impressed, so she says, “Yeah.”

“How do you know Freud in seventh grade?”

“I don’t really know Freud,” she says quickly.

“Oh,” he says. “But you know what anal means.”

“It means stuck up,” she hazards.

“Well, yeah,” he says, “but calling someone anal—you’re saying they’re anal-retentive. It’s one of the stages of development, right after the oral stage when babies get pleasure from sucking. The anal stage is when kids get pleasure from being able to control their defecation.”

“Defecation?”

“Shitting.”

“Oh,” she says, looking up at the screen door. Her mom is looking out, a question on her face. “That’s really gross.”

“You said it.”

“I just meant he was uptight.”

“Well, but you’re totally right, Slater is definitely anal. It’s the perfect word. I bet he loves sitting on the can and trying to keep a big turd from coming out.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

Silence.

“Where are you, anyway?” he says. “Like, where in the house.”

“I’m out on the back steps.”

“So you don’t even have to sneak out,” he says.

“No.”

“So are you coming?”

She tries to picture him lifting her up, the ball coming down at that tremendous speed toward her glove, but all she sees in her head is Captain Slater hunched on the toilet, his tuft of hair wildly flopping at the top of his head, his face scrunched up with delight. She feels a black wave wash over her, a nausea similar yet utterly different from the waves that have swelled in her for weeks.

“No,” she says. “I think—I mean—”

“Oh,” he says. “OK.”

“Did you need to talk to my mom again?” she asks. Her voice trembles. “She’s right inside if you still need to talk to her.”

“No,” he says. “I’m good.”

“Well,” she says. “I gotta go. See ya later.”

She pushes the hang-up button on the phone and the wave rushes through her. All she can think about is naked bodies, hairy and pink and freckled, and what they’re supposed to do. It is horrifying.

§

She has not noticed before how Mr. Phil’s eyes bulge behind his glasses, as though they’re being pushed slowly from his head. At the field he tries to talk to her, but she walks past without saying anything. When he cracks jokes to her, she doesn’t smile.

On the way home from a game, her mom says, “Kelly, you’ve been really rude to Mr. Phil lately.”

“He’s lame.”

“What did he talk about on the phone?”

She hesitates. “Nothing much.”

She knows: She could tell the truth and get him in trouble. She could tell a small lie and the trouble would get bigger. She pictures him sitting at a meeting in a small, smoky room, surrounded by yelling coaches and crying mothers, accusations diving at him like mosquitoes. But she is not a tattletale, and the anger she could drag from the grown-ups is not the same as her anger. Hers is duller and less electric, less grounded in love and protection. Her anger is selfish: He did not give her what she wanted, and though she doesn’t know what that was, she knows it’s ruined.

§

She wants her anger to break him, but after a week of her turning away, he starts joking around with Tanya instead. He teases her and nudges her off the base during warm-ups; she giggles and preens.

Kelly imagines his car smashed up and his body crushed inside of it, the sharp edges of CCR CDs jutting from wounds in his fleshy stomach. When she swings the bat she imagines the ball is his mouth. One game she hits it so far that the little girls in the outfield have to run back to the fence, and she runs so fast it turns into a homerun. The team lines up to slap her hand, and Coach McDonough says, “You are really getting strong, Kelly!”

She is certain that something terrible will happen to Mr. Phil any day, but game after game he’s still there, joking around with the mothers and kids. The games can’t happen without him.

§

Kelly's mom is at a coaches meeting and Kelly's waiting in the bleachers, watching one of the boys' games and adding fresh strings of gum to the wad she's already chewing, when she sees Mr. Phil approaching from the snack bar. He's out of uniform and freshly showered, though he's still wearing his umpire hat. He heads toward the stands and Kelly is sure he's coming to her, but then she notices Tanya sitting two rows down.

She slides down the benches till she's right behind Tanya. Mr. Phil glances at Kelly, but turns to sit down with Tanya anyway, giving Kelly barely a second to slip half her wad of gum under his butt.

"Hey Tanya," he says. "What are you up to?"

"Just watching the game," Tanya says, giggling. She has been in a gray haze for months, but now whenever he's around she gets all smiley. She doesn't look like the same girl who was crying for her dad on the pitcher's mound only a month ago. She doesn't slump anymore; she holds her head up high. Kelly sees how pretty Tanya is, like someone has turned a light on inside. She wonders if she looked like that when she was the favorite, and jealousy mixes in her throat with the sugary juice from her gum.

"Want a slushee?" Mr. Phil asks Tanya.

"Oh, that's okay," she says.

"I'm going anyway," he says, shifting down the bench. "What flavor? Cherry?"

"Hey," Kelly says. Neither of them looks at her.

"Grape," Tanya says.

"Hey, Phil," Kelly says, louder. "Phil!" This time they hear, and both of them turn. "Hey, Phil, can you get me a slushee?"

Tanya frowns at her, and Kelly feels her mouth tremble, but she says it again. "I want a slushee too. Can you get me one?" A couple of parents and kids turn to look at them.

Mr. Phil looks at her and she looks back. She feels currents pass between them: the sounds of the fans, the umpire

calling pitches, that perfect catch that hovered in her head, the dark space of the storm drain and the echoes his voice would have made there: Hey number 12.

“Actually, I just realized I’m running late,” he says, looking at his watch. “I’ll get you kids next time.”

He stands and walks away. The gum on the seat pulls a long pink thread out behind him that gets thinner and thinner until it breaks.

Tanya stands up and glares at her. “You are so rude, Kelly,” she says, then scurries after Mr. Phil, her sneakers kicking dust clouds from the gravel. Kelly can hear her calling him. He’s trailing the ribbon of wispy pink gum from his butt. It catches on the breeze and flutters behind him like a hairless tail.