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2020
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The Glove

–Damien Wilkins

At softball I like to be the catcher.

That's because you always want to be involved in the game, my dad tells me.

Hmm, I say.

I was like you too, he says.

Hmm.

Because you want to be in there, not loafing around or picking daisies or doing handstands like some kids.

One time my dad came to a softball game and Ben Dreaver was patrolling the outfield upside down. When the ball came near, Ben walked towards it on his hands. People were shouting at him but he took his time.

You're not some dreamer, my dad says.

Some Dreaver, you mean, I say.

What?

Never mind.

When my dad was in the navy, he got a tattoo. It ran down his left bicep and said *Gimme a Break*. This was way before he had a family.

Behind the batter, it's true, you're involved in every ball. You call the play. You watch the runners. You're coiled, ready to throw, to tag. But that isn't why I like it. I like it because . . . you can stop the game. The play ends each time the ball enters your glove. For a moment, you have decided, through the act of catching, that this particular segment is finished. Until you throw the ball back, the world is still. It is waiting. Nothing more can happen. It is all yours.

Today is the 14th of February.

There was another 14th February, the first one if you like. Once upon a time I had an older brother, called Mike. I don't remember it. I was five years old and Mike

was ten. What happened: the car Mike was travelling in blew a tyre and went off down a bank. Mike was going to a softball tournament with his best friend, Ronnie Saker, and Mr Saker was driving. The Sakers weren't badly hurt but Mike's neck was broken, clean, they said clean, I remember that. He was killed straight off and it was 'peaceful' everyone said, or as peaceful as hurtling down a bank and being thrown around like a doll can be, and it was a clean break.

Gimme a break.

I don't really remember Mike. Of course there are photos but if you were to ask me about the sound of his voice or anything, I'd find it hard to be accurate.

I remember there used to be someone else in the bedroom with me at night. A body, sleeping and breathing. This presence in the room at night was Mike, that was my brother. And now there was just a bed. I listened hard to the empty bed. Sometimes it creaked.

Then, after two years or more, my folks shifted the bed out of the room.

In the Sakers' car, Mike had been wearing the glove.

Bury the glove, my dad said. I don't wanna see it.

No, my mum said. I'll die if we bury the glove.

That's Mikey's glove, said my dad. Belongs with him.

I'll jump in the hole with him, may as well, said my mum.

The reason I know they said these things is that they repeated them. It was their anniversary argument. Every 14th of Feb. What to do, what should have been done with the glove.

My dad would yell, I'm going to get that glove right now and throw it in the rubbish!

Somehow Mike's softball glove had ended up in the glass cabinet in the lounge. My dad never looked in the cabinet. He avoided it. When he had to get something out of the cabinet—a bowl or the fancy wine glasses—he sent me. He passed the cabinet with his head turned.

One day—I must have been eight or nine—I took it from there and went and played ball with my friends. I showed my friends my brother's name written in the glove. That's my brother, I said. But he's dead. They were all amazed and I felt wonderful to have a dead brother and to have his glove with his name written inside it in his own handwriting. I said, He was wearing this glove when he died.

Is there blood? one of the kids asked.

No, I said, he broke his neck and it was a clean break.

When I got home, Mum caught me with the glove and suddenly I was saying all this stuff about missing Mike and wanting to be near something that had been his and why was the glove in the glass cabinet where it couldn't be touched and wasn't it better to let Mike's glove have a life.

When I started in on the speech I was just making it up. But by the time I'd finished, I was crying, and my mum went quiet and finally she said she would talk to my dad about it.

Outcome: I could use the glove. I heard them upstairs arguing. I don't care about the glove, said my dad. Give it to him! Maybe he'll lose it somewhere and we'll be done with it.

Here's the strangest thing though. Once I had it, and had been given permission to use it, I didn't want to. I kept it in my drawer and I only took it out when I was alone in my bedroom and only then once in a while. I had my catcher's mitt anyway by then.

We used to celebrate the anniversary of the accident. The Sakers, whose car Mike had been in when he died, would come round for a piece of cake. The photos would get pulled out and someone would remember some little funny thing Mike had done. Ronnie Saker would look at the carpet. But also he'd look quickly at the glass cabinet. Then back to the carpet. My mum would remark on his height. Look at you! He would blush, ashamed of growing up, of getting older. And my dad would say to me, Take Ronnie outside and do something. We'd go into the back garden and, without talking, slowly pass my soccer ball back and forth until it was time for the Sakers to go home.

Then the Sakers couldn't make it one year and it was kind of a relief because the next year they didn't come either, but still the three of us would sit round with the cake and the photos, trying to remember the little things Mike had done. Finally there wasn't a cake, just a prayer for Mike from Mum, who usually didn't say prayers, or not aloud and not visibly. At the dinner table when she started speaking and clasping her hands, my dad and I knew enough to bow our heads, and when she'd finished my dad said 'Amen', a word I'd only ever heard him use as part of the phrase 'amen to that'.

Today is the 14th of February.

We sit at the kitchen table, eating dinner. It is too strange. No arguments, no prayers, no nothing. Have they both forgotten the date? It's all pretty pleasant and unreal. Mum and Dad chat about nothing much. The weather! Then Mum stands up to clear the plates and she pauses and says, Ah well, Mikey would have been 17.

Dad looks at her and reaches for her hand. That's true, he says. And they both smile at me.

I feel as though I can't breathe.

I go upstairs and take Mike's softball glove out of the drawer. I put it on, then I put the glove over my face. I must look weird. I must look like I don't have a face.

Inside the glove it's dark. The beautiful sweet leather smell. Like toffee and varnish. I give it a lick. Okay, it doesn't taste great.

You could yell into the glove and hardly any sound came out. It was as though you were at the end of a long corridor, and the little slits between the fingers were windows splintering the light. I'd done it before—the muted yelling. But tonight, no. I take the glove off my face.

Downstairs I say to my dad, Coming out for some throws?

Not right now, he says. He's slumped in front of the TV.

What about you, Mum? I say.

Me? She's wiping down the table.

Come out for some throws.

Her? says my dad. She can't throw.

Well, that's not true, says my mum.

Come out then, I say.

She looks out the window. The day is already losing the light. It's a nice evening, she says.

I have my catcher's mitt by my side. Mike's glove is back in the glass cabinet. I put it there. I say, How am I supposed to get better if I don't practice?

It's still warm, the night air a light covering on the bare skin of my arms and legs. I squat down in our back garden and punch the glove. Toss it in, Mum. Give it all you've got.

All I've got? Be careful what you ask for, buddy.

Wind that arm back and throw it as hard as you can!

My dad has come to the open ranchslider in his bare feet. He's grinning, rubbing his tattoo. I know that soon he'll be taking the ball from Mum and giving me some throws. He wants me to be better. He's itching to take over. He's got a hard throw and he doesn't much care that you're a kid.

You ready for this? says Mum.

Do it, says my dad.

Ready, I say.

She winds her arm way back and lifts her front foot as if she's a baseball pitcher.

Wrong sport, says my dad. He's laughing. Wrong sport!

Then she throws the ball.

Maybe I closed my eyes for a split second. Not because I was afraid. But because . . . when you close your eyes, you're taking a picture of what you've just seen, right? You're keeping it safe. Click. The night my mum sent down the pitch, watched by my dad, who was laughing. The 14th of February. As if this was the new thing we did now on this special date. We convened in the back garden on a warm summer evening and threw balls at each other with all our might. We remembered in this way and we went a little crazy.

I don't where that ball went though that my mum threw. Nowhere near me and my outstretched glove. Into the neighbours! Yes. Must have passed through the hedge with barely a whistle or a rustle. Passed clean through. That ball had some speed. Hey, Mike, hey Mikey, you should have seen it.

We all paused. It was completely quiet. Then through the hedge the neighbour's dog was barking, very excited. Then he stopped too. Silence. He had the ball in his mouth, I suppose.

ABOUT THE WRITER



Damien Wilkins went to Hutt Valley High School in the days when the First XV ruled. This was bad news for an arty footballer. When the football dream faded he wanted to be in a band, which turned out to be easy: he just found people who liked to make a noise. Reading William Faulkner made him want to be a writer. Best advice: no one else knows what they're doing either.

An extract from *Read the World: Volume Five*

The Auckland Writers Festival is grateful for the support of the Freemasons Foundation