

The Gentleman's Game

The silhouettes move around in front of her like shadow puppets. She is standing on the edge of the cricket pitch, trying to watch her son field, indistinguishable though he is from the outlines of the other teenagers. The late July sunset trickles through the trees that surround the club, casting strange spots of light over the players. On the warm breeze travels a soft murmur from the huddled group of other spectators but Marion pays them no attention. Her mind only has space for the training. She glances up to the sky and feels stagnant. The gentle rhythm of balls hitting against bats echoes over the landscape.

Caleb's face moves into a patch of light. He looks so much like his father, Marion thinks, with his brow creased in a strained focus. She watches him lean down to stop a ball with his foot and throw it back to the bowler in one seamless, elegant motion. His movements are not purely reactionary, they seem considered and exact, the actions of an independent human being. Marion stands smiling, admiring the very fact that he is separate from her, but from where he stands, she looks isolated and disapproving. Caleb notices how far she is from the crowd of other parents, abandoned like a pariah. He wishes she hadn't come and yet, watching him intercept another ball, Marion feels very glad she did.

Under his cricket whites, Caleb is prickled with heat and discomfort. His mother would only buy him the cheap, polyester kit until he could prove he was properly committed. It makes his hair go static and, when he scratches his arm now, his skin feels warm and damp. Fielding doesn't really interest him, he has to become too supportive, too receptive in this role. To Caleb, there is nothing exciting in the collaborative nature of cricket, he sees importance only in proving his own skill, dedicating all his energy to a set of rules for his gain alone. He likes to bowl or to bat, to know he is dictating the game rather than just auxiliary to it. And it is in the intensity of these moments, facing a new ball or staring down an opposing batsman, that he feels most still, dissolved into a blissful nothingness. He becomes no longer himself but a body finely tuned to win. Emerging back afterwards is almost difficult, his visions blurs and dazes as the thrill leaves him. A clear, crisp pain will ring in his head and sometimes he cannot control the movements of his jaw. Caleb is experiencing none of that thrill now though, and so, as he stands in the middle of the field with his mind wandering, he knows completely who he is.

The interest in cricket only began a few months ago, when Caleb found a collection of his father Luke's old copies of *Wisden* in the attic. He laughed at them at first, how obsessive and specific they seemed, how unexciting. But then it became exciting for him to sit in his bedroom for whole evenings, memorising the scores of test matches in 1987. To know this information was suddenly very important.

Marion was shut out when he started to do this. In the hours he spent upstairs, she would sit listening to the radio or read alone, worrying she was not doing anything to support him and ultimately failing to show him enough care. In a way, she blamed Caleb for her worries, he was giving her no chance to mother him, but it was difficult to feel his burrowing away from her. Sometimes, she called up to him, asking him to come down with a voice she made sound warm and welcoming. There would always be a pause before he told her he was busy. And to his mind he was busy, intensely so: there was the entire 1993 Ashes squad to remember.

Luke's own cricket obsession had never rubbed off on Marion but it was always joyful for her to watch the pleasure he found in it. Their summers had been filled with long hours in front of the TV, watching test matches together, she draped sleepily over the sofa and he rigid in the

armchair, his body jittering with tension at every ball. Later, they would discuss the day's play, Luke skating excitedly from one idea to another. He had felt strongly about everything to do with the sport: who was the greatest batsman ever, who should not have made the team, and how it was almost morally wrong to shout 'catch it!' when a ball spun high into the air. It puts too much pressure on the player, he would explain with full sincerity. And at the local club he was the star bowler, Marion and Caleb often spending entire Saturday afternoons cheering him on from the boundary. To her, cricket became more than itself: it was the calm delight of summer's heat, it was walking around the house barefoot, it was him.

So, when Caleb told her he wanted to start playing earlier this year, Marion was oddly pleased. There seemed something poetic in it, something right. They went shopping for the kit together and when he came out of the changing rooms to show her, she had to turn away to hide her tears. Caleb felt embarrassed when his mother did this, wishing she would not see anything more in his request to join the cricket team than the fact he just needed something to do. And when he started to perform consistently well in matches, her pride was loud and overbearing. He could not understand why the weekly training sessions meant so much to her, why she was so eager to stand in the dark and watch him. Caleb told himself there was nothing emotionally significant in his cricket practice: it was an exercise in precision just as memorising the *Wisden* had been. His mother seemed to think it represented some kind of triumph though, and she made the car journeys back from matches slow and uncomfortable

'The gentleman's game,' she once joked. 'I'll have to start treating you like one.'

'Yeah,' he responded with a light, forced laugh.

Since he would not communicate with her at home, Marion liked the drives they took to and from the club. For the 15 minutes of the journey, they were held in the space of the car, experiencing the same things at the same time, fastened into a physical togetherness. Perhaps, that was why she enjoyed watching Caleb's matches so much; it was reassuring to feel that they were both experiencing one moment in two different but connected ways. Even as her son played on the distant side of a field, she held on to her feelings of unity.

Now she is watching the team perform some kind of catching practice, the procedure of which is difficult to make out from where she stands. She has moved further away from the other parents, trying to find a spot where she can see Caleb better. Over the field, a flurry of balls glide and dance in the air, criss-crossing to make pleasing shapes in front of the setting sun. Gradually, they fall into a noticeable sequence, a polite to and fro emerging as the players become used to the strength and speed of each other's throws. For Marion, it is soothing to observe.

On the pitch, Caleb is finding the exercise unnerving. His partner, a tall, ratty boy, keeps throwing the ball higher and higher so that it disappears into the darkening sky. Each time, Caleb has only a second to ready himself before the ball comes back into sight and he must move into its pathway. The throws start landing harder and harder, leaving large red marks on his palms that sting tightly. When he catches it, Caleb winds the ball between his fingers with tender consideration, proving a sort of control over it and trying to slow it down. He is throwing the ball back just as hard and fast now, as if to show off his power, and he feels strangely upset, annoyed at his partner for making him so shaky and uncertain. The pair are no longer working together, serving one another's improvement; they are decidedly opposed, their throws having become viscous and disconnected. Now, the boy in front of him releases the ball into the air again, pushing his arm and shoulder forward with incredible momentum. It flies

up and, for Caleb, time seems to stretch like elastic. He moves his hands carefully into position, ready to cradle the ball into his chest, to hold it closely, to make it still. Then down it comes. But it moves faster than Caleb expects. Its redness appears torrid and malicious. With his eyelid lifted, he sees the ball grow larger and he panics. He moves too late, his hands are too slow. Fumbling as it falls, he tries to push the ball away from him, skimming the seam with his thumb. It spins up momentarily before falling back down through his fingers and landing with a heavy thud just under his eye.

Marion watches as a cricket ball plummets into her son's face. She sees him wrap his hand around his cheek, clasping it as the ball bounces to the ground. The boy he was practicing with rushes over to him. Marion staggers forward, moving with the other parents and teenage players who are crowding towards Caleb, alive with worried, excited chatter. She cannot get to her son, a loud, raucous circle having formed around him. Suddenly, there are shouts and gasps, some parents glancing back at her with looks of hurried concern and disapproval. What is happening? Over it all, she can hear loud swearing, a continuous stream of language that she knows is in Caleb's voice. The words gurgle out lurid and uncontrollable, landing painfully on her ears. She moves through the crowd, clawing frantically, until she sees what has been obscured. A boy kneeling on the grass and another boy standing over him. And there is blood, a white polo shirt spotted red. But it is not Caleb's blood, it is not his shirt. Marion stands still as a woman holds Caleb back, his eyes furious and his body writhing with rage. Her son. He has done something bad, she knows, he has hurt somebody. His throwing partner, surrounded by well-intentioned parents, has a torrent of thick, crimson blood pouring from his nose, his face pale as a man, probably his father, takes a handkerchief to it. People are shouting at Caleb, scolding him for what he has done. But what has he done exactly? To Marion, it is still not entirely clear. She looks over at him, the beginnings of a bruise blossoming on his cheek, and, when his gaze meets hers, he stares back blankly.

Luke died slowly over the course of a year and a half. He and Marion first noticed something was wrong when he stopped being able to bring his arm round fast enough to bowl properly, but eventually he even struggled to talk. Marion ended up having to do everything for him. He joked that he was now just a big baby which, even though she tried to smile, Marion didn't find funny. Caleb hated to see his father gradually weakening in this way. It pained him to watch as Luke became unable to dress himself, unable to use the stairs, unable even to move one foot in front of the other. His strength left him in such mundane ways, Caleb thought, his body exhausted by normal daily routine. There was nothing epic about his deterioration, it was just tedious and unimpressive.

At school Caleb did not know how to talk to his friends about what was happening. He felt himself turning away from them, cocooned by his own thoughts to such an extent that he was almost able to ignore other people entirely. He wore the burden of his father's illness around with him constantly as if it would make him a bad person to think about something else for even a single moment. In his free time, he gathered as much information about Luke's condition as he could, his search history reading like that of a hypochondriac. He organised his research into neatly organised documents, convincing himself this not only made him a devoted son but that eventually the disease would be forced to submit to his unbelievable wealth of knowledge. One thing he never looked up was the life expectancy after diagnosis though, this fact just seemed irrelevant.

From the moment they first went to the doctor, Marion knew her husband was going to die. She quickly became resigned to the fact that recovery was impossible. Even as she drove home from the surgery with Luke beside her, she knew her priorities had changed. How would she financially support their son on her own? Could she really become both his mother and father figure? Would she have to? She spent the next eighteen months working through these questions as she cared for Luke, her mind coming to logical, succinct solutions. Her resolutions started to feel so obvious that she did not want anyone to complicate them, finding it stressful to talk to acquaintances in the supermarket who expressed sympathy about how difficult things must be. Anyway she knew their sympathy was more for themselves than for her, a way of testing their own empathy by imagining her assumed hardship. But Marion did worry about Caleb, doubting whether a son could become a good man without a good father.

For the last week of his life, Luke was moved into hospital and Caleb sat with him most days. Marion walked in and out of the ward, chasing doctors for practical conversations and updates, so father and son were often left together talking.

‘Dad, what do you miss most?’ Caleb asked at one point.

Luke could only speak slowly now but his lips still curled in a slight smile. ‘I miss our days at the cricket club,’ he said.

‘I’m sorry.’ Caleb turned his face away and smoothed the hair off his forehead.

‘You don’t need to be sorry.’

Luke started smiling properly, his mouth spread wide and his teeth exposed.

‘And I will miss you, of course,’ he said.

‘No,’ Caleb said, reaching for his father’s hand, trying to disbelieve the inevitable. ‘You won’t have to.’

‘How could you do that?’

They are in the car on their way home. The air conditioning is on too high, blowing cold and stale into Marion’s face as she grips the steering wheel. Caleb sits next to her and fidgets with his fingers.

‘I don’t know,’ he says.

And he really doesn’t. He remembers how the rising fury and embarrassment overwhelmed him, a bubble of emotion that seemed only eradicable through aggression. So he punched the other boy in the face and it felt good to do, it felt right. If nobody had told him his actions were wrong, they would still seem victorious, like the climax of a film. But as he stares out of the car window now, hedges rushing past, the event does not occur to him as a reality. He wonders at the boy he injured, his distressed, bloody face ringing with a sense of falseness.

‘I don’t know,’ he repeats. ‘I did it without thinking.’

‘You weren’t thinking? That poor boy did nothing to you.’

Marion turns off the main road without slowing down. She wants to him to boil over with emotion, to explain that his violence was the effect of long pent-up stress, to finally talk. He stays quiet though, choking her with his reserve. Is this who her son is now, a silent aggressor, unpredictable and forever distanced from her?

‘He was fine,’ Caleb says.

‘God, that’s not the point. You hurt him.’

He has no response.

‘Do you not care?’ Marion says.

‘Of course I care. It’s just, well, it’s happened now.’

Marion keeps her eyes firmly on the road, forcing a stare to such an extent that her vision starts to blur.

‘That’s all you have to say?’ she says. ‘You’re so difficult at the moment.’

Caleb is turned away so she can’t see his reaction but he feels the words land with a dull weight at the back of his brain. Did she mean that?

‘What would your father say?’ asks Marion.

‘Have said,’ he retorts.

Marion sighs precisely and it is only then that Caleb notices the wetness of his cheeks, tears falling fast from his eyes. It surprises him that he has been crying and he turns his head towards the door so his mother cannot see. He doesn’t want her to know what he is thinking about, to let his body betray his emotions. But she does notice, and reaches to take his hand carefully in hers. He lets her, giving in for a moment to her care. Caleb is not yet sure he can admit what he feels in words but he decides the feeling on its own is enough.

As she drives up their street, holding on to Caleb’s hand, Marion thinks of her last few minutes with Luke and how peacefully he slipped away, gently dying in front of her with no drama. There was a relief in the stillness of that moment, in the realisation that the prolonged wait was over and that real grief could finally begin. Marion used to feel guilty about that feeling, as if she had been wishing Luke away, but she doesn’t now. She knows it had its purpose. By the time this memory fades, she is already pulling into their driveway, the headlamps splashing the empty house with light. Not wanting to shatter this shared, unexpected calm, neither Caleb nor Marion can move. It is a couple of seconds before either of them gets out of the car.