

His Long Game

Rand Richards Cooper

—So, he says to his wife as the boy stomps across the dirt yard, toward the hill that leads up to the Navajo Trading Post.

—We're just letting him walk away?

—Did you see him punch out that window? she asks. —Did you see the look on his face?

—Of course I saw.

The boy puts one hand on the split rail fence and vaults over; up go the Levis—the Levis she patched for him—and down again on the other side. He doesn't look back. Disappears around the garage with that bandy-legged, little man's walk of his, brush-cut head bobbing.

—I'm sorry, she says. —But it doesn't feel right any more. He's so angry at us.

—He's twelve, he reminds her. —No one said it would be easy.

She turns to their daughter. —Laura, honey, she says, put your mittens back on, it's cold.

He inspects the shattered window of the Rambler as their four-year-old croons to her pink stuffed bunny. There's no doubt the boy has a temper, could be a delinquent in the making, if no one steps in. The boy's father is a drunk: he himself has stitched up the man, following a drunken fender-bender. One thing the Public Health Service hadn't told him, fresh from his internship back in Pennsylvania, was that half the tribe were alcoholics. He sees them over in Gallup, where they go to drink off-reservation: whole families standing in empty lots, passing the bottle around, father, mother, sons. A delinquent, because that is normal out here, unless someone steps in.

Slammin' Sammy, he'd started calling the boy—not for his temper, but for golf. A golfer-in-exile himself, he'd tee off from a grassy patch behind the Health Service clinic, with a dry arroyo for his water obstacle and joshua trees for pins. When his balls started disappearing, he suspected the mange-ridden dogs that scavenged

the settlement. But the scavenger was a boy: a boy named Sam, like so many Navajos. He caught him skulking away from the arroyo bed, the golf balls in a paper bag. The boy had clubs too, it turned out—an ancient driver and some rusted irons, one crudely flattened into a putter. He lived in a dingy hogan over the hill behind the trading post. Had never even seen a golf course. *But you should see the swing on this kid*, he told his wife that night. *He's a natural*.

He picks glass from the broken car window. —Ever see his mother? he asks her now. —She's the one with the burns.

—I know, she says. —It's sad. It really is.

Burns are epidemic in the tribe. They build fires in the centers of their hogans, and people fall in. The boy himself always smells of smoke.

—Steve, she sighs. —We tried. It's not working.

Nothing much has worked here, he thinks; nothing has happened as they imagined. Their house a drafty log shack, their daughter always sick, the weather far too cold for Arizona, their cat vanished, snatched perhaps by a coyote. And him doing little more than stitching drunks back together and delivering Indian babies with no more future than mud. That was why they decided to help Sammy. Why sponsor a child in Africa or India, they reasoned, when they could save one right here?

With a whisk broom he sweeps glass from the car out onto the driveway, then into a dustpan. There are things he hasn't told his wife. Like how on the way back from Albuquerque with Sammy—the nearest golf course—he spied a shiny new club in the boy's bag; how, when he turned and drove back to the course, the boy went sul- len, then burst out, flailing and yelling in the parking lot, so that it almost came to blows between them.

His daughter has gotten her mittens back on and is playing with her bunny, wrapping it in a blanket his wife helped her knit. He thinks about how he and the boy grappled in the parking lot, until finally he got him in a bear hug, and the boy calmed down and meekly

did as he was told, bringing the stolen golf club back into the shop and handing it over.

—I don't like giving up, he says, and dumps the broken window glass into the garbage. —Are you sure we should be giving up?

—No, she says, I'm not. I'm not sure at all.

—And you're wrong about one thing. He's not angry at us. He's just angry.

At that moment, up on the hill by the Trading Post, he sees the boy, heading for home.

—*Hey Sam!* he calls out. —*Slammin' Sammy!*

Too far to hear, the boy keeps climbing, doesn't look back.

—I think we should give it one more try, he says.

He sees the indecision on his wife's face and watches the boy climb toward home. He doesn't want him to get over the top of the hill. If he lets the boy get over, he decides, it's done, he's gone, back to where land is so arid you need twenty acres to graze a sheep; where repo men lurk at the edge of the reservation to take back pickup trucks; where people own nothing but their misery.

He goes into the garage. Fetches golf ball, driver, and a tee.

—What are you doing? his wife asks when he comes back out.

—Watch this, he says, stabbing the tee into the dirt. He takes a practice swing, sighting past the fence and up toward the top of the hill. It's nearly two hundred yards, but his long game has always been his strength.

—I'm bringing him back. I'm airmailing an invitation.

—You're crazy, she says, but she's chuckling. —Look at Daddy, she tells their daughter. —Daddy's crazy.

He takes aim above the boy, for the crown of the hill, and as he swings, he's caught up in the gesture itself, in its poetry. Steve knows more than he has told his wife: the two times Sammy has shown up at the clinic, bruised and hurt and cursing his father, and the re- venges taken, the thefts, the fights at the mission school, the fires lit behind the broken-down hogan; he even suspects the boy is behind

the disappearance of their cat. But Steve believes you can save a twelve-year-old. And because he himself is only twenty-seven and has been blessed so far with a lucky life, he cannot imagine how the drive he now hits, lofting toward the hill, might crash to earth in a far reach of his family's future. A burly twenty-four-year-old knocking at their door in Pennsylvania; their teenage daughter missing; a car joylarking into a telephone pole at ninety miles per hour: It hangs out there, a world of grief. But Steve doesn't sense it, not even a shiver. For now, it is a sunny afternoon in 1966, and he is glad to think he and his wife are intervening in a boy's life, without imagining that the boy might actually be intervening in theirs. And so he feels only satisfaction as his perfect drive plunks the hillside not twenty feet from the top and trickles back down; and Sammy, startled, turns and looks, then picks up the ball and starts back down the hill.