

Elias Keller

Larry Leagues

Fiction

I was in the break room of the Carter Theater, eating lunch and paging through a copy of the *Trenton Times*, when I stumbled upon the article: a small, throwaway piece of local news, just a few terse paragraphs and a mugshot. But it was him, all right. Larry Hull—even after twenty years I recognized his messy blond hair and big eyelids, hanging like mudflaps. I suddenly remembered that summer afternoon, all of us in the back of Larry's truck, the memory cutting through the grim headline.

Reading the article, I can't say I was too surprised, given some things I remembered about Larry. He'd never been much for rules, anyway. Then again, there were a lot of other things I remembered about Larry.

I don't think Breezewood is around anymore, but twenty years ago it was a thriving day camp in New Jersey—not far from the Carter Theater, actually. That summer I'd just turned 11 and was in a fifth-grade group. We didn't sleep at Breezewood, thankfully; Monday through Friday, busses dropped us off in the morning and drove us home in the afternoons. This was

my fourth summer at Breezewood and I'd hated every one of them so far. I hated the sports, the bugs, the heat, the dirt—pretty much everything the camp had to offer. But every year my mother overruled my objections and signed me up.

"You can't just sit around all summer, Jeremy. You have to do something."

But wasn't playing theater with the girls in my neighborhood "doing something?" We'd write silly scripts, make costumes, and recruit other kids to watch our shows. We even made a curtain out of hockey sticks and a bedsheet. And it's not like Breezewood was the only summer option: there were drama and art camps. But my parents would have seen that as weird, something "normal" boys don't do. It was also convenient to send me to Breezewood. My older sister Elissa went there, too, and *liked* it. That summer Elissa was 15 and a counselor-in-training.

On the first day of camp I met my counselor, Danny, who was determined to make me a better athlete with remedial sports tutoring. "You know what your problem is? You're afraid of the ball." He lobbed a soccer ball and bonked it with his head. "See? It's just a ball."

Danny was right: I was afraid of the ball, afraid of it being kicked right in my face, for example. I couldn't shake that fear, or my clumsiness, so the only thing Danny really accomplished was to make me our group's outcast: "Captain Klutz."

After a few days I put a stop to the tutoring. "Don't waste your time," I told Danny, trying to spin a basketball on my finger.

"I was just trying to help, Jerm'." He snatched the ball and banked in a layup. "Leagues start next week, you know."

I knew. Of course I knew.

Leagues, the annual intra-camp sports tournament for the boys, were a camp tradition, like Friday barbecues and our stupid camp song, "Welcome Breezewood." We were randomly assigned to teams and had a leagues period every afternoon, either practice or a game. The younger kids played in "baby leagues," which no one cared about, but leagues for fifth- and sixth-graders were serious. The games were competitive and a boy's contribution to his team pretty much determined his place in the camp pecking order. And the counselors who coached the older boys were zealous about winning the championship; in fact, the outlandish competitiveness of leagues was a cherished Breezewood tradition.

Hence my anxiety: I would be the worst player on a team that *really* cared about winning. So the night before leagues started, I begged my mother to pull me out of camp. "It's just going to be about *leagues* from now on. And I'm the worst player."

"Then you should try to get *better*. Ask your dad to practice with you this weekend."

I flounced away and stomped upstairs. "Why do you have to send me to stupid *camp*?"

The next day, our camp director Bruce marched out to the flagpole to announce the leagues rosters. For being the director of a sports camp, Bruce didn't really look the part. He was short and thin and wore white socks pulled up to his knees. We called him "Nosejob" behind his back, not because he had *had* one, but because he needed one: his nose was a crooked, bulbous thing attached to a narrow mousy face. He was constantly slathering on coconut sunblock and smelled like a walking piña colada. No one was really *afraid* of Bruce, but we tried to stay out of trouble so we wouldn't have to hear his lectures about "how it works at Breezewood."

Bruce read out name after name until he reached Team 6 and called out "Jeremy Tolman." But I didn't jump around elatedly like the other boys on my team—I was rigid with horror. My coach was none other than Larry Hull, a Breezewood tradition unto himself.

Larry was in his mid-twenties, the camp's oldest counselor by far, and had been working at Breezewood for years. Most people would've pegged him as a burly, handsome laborer hired to fix something at the camp rather than its most popular counselor. He didn't come from the affluent suburban world of Breezewood's campers and counselors: he'd gone to a rough high school, didn't go to college, and lived in his own apartment in Trenton. Larry also worked at a restaurant in Princeton and mowed lawns.

Until now the only time I'd really observed Larry was during a recent free swim period, my favorite period, because you didn't have to swim. I'd sit on a vinyl chair on the grassy area

around the pool and read, tuning out the looping soundtrack of *Tweet!* “Walk!” *Tweet!* “Walk!” Free swim was also when I got my revenge on bullies with my “Swim Strikes.”

Perry, a boy in my group and an outstanding athlete, was my first target that summer. He’d picked on me from the first day of camp and was the one who’d dubbed me “Captain Klutz.” So after we changed for free swim, I dawdled at the lockers, which didn’t have locks, and once I was alone, I grabbed Perry’s socks, shorts and shirt, dunked them in the toilet, and put them back in his locker. Not really an effective deterrent, but satisfying enough.

Afterwards, I was reading by the pool when I heard Larry bellow as he bounded by me, cannonballing into the water with a showstopping splash. He was the only counselor at Breezewood with tattoos—a grinning skull on one big bicep and a tattered Irish flag on the other—pretty badass back then, not like these days when tattoos are about as tough as lipstick. In the water, Larry was instantly mobbed by kids, all shouting “Throw me! Throw me!” He sank underwater and everyone waited in anticipation. Then a boy shot up in the air, legs kicking, arms flailing, hooting ecstatically and flying in a broad arc before splashing back down.

Boys, girls, even girl counselors—Larry threw them all. A few of the lighter kids looked like they’d clear the water entirely and splatter on the concrete—“Easy, Larry!” the lifeguard kept yelling. Actually it looked pretty fun. I kicked off my flip-flops to jump in, but by then Larry was already out of the pool, striding back to the patio. A bit later, I saw him playing cards with three other counselors at a plastic table, his track

shorts still sopping wet and his hand resting on the tanned thigh of a girl counselor.

Larry had won the leagues championship for the past four years, earning the nickname “Larry Leagues.” Maybe that’s why he kept working at Breezewood. I doubt it was for the money. But even if Larry could earn more mowing lawns and bussing tables, there wasn’t much glory, or flirty girl counselors, in those menial jobs. Anyway, everyone assigned to Larry’s team was thrilled—except me. Bruce’s rule was “Everyone plays,” meaning all boys were supposed to get equal playing time in leagues. I couldn’t just sit on the sidelines.

We followed Larry to a grassy clearing and gathered in a circle to introduce ourselves. “Great,” Perry cracked, when I said my name. Unfortunately we had ended up on the same team. “We get Captain Klutz. He can’t do *anything*.”

Larry pointed toward the soccer field. “Hey Perry—show me what *you* can do. Take a lap around that goal.” Perry ran off, his white basketball sneakers streaking through the grass. When he returned, Larry nodded again toward the goal. “Do another.” His voice had a faint tinge of discipline.

Perry almost questioned the order, but no one defied Larry—and off he ran while the rest of us fidgeted silently. When Perry came back, huffing and wiping his face with the bottom of his shirt, Larry sat down on the grass and invited him to do the same.

“Now—you were reminding us of your teammate’s name.”

“Jeremy,” Perry mumbled.

Larry chewed the stem of a dandelion.

"Thought it was Captain something."

Perry scowled. "It's Jeremy."

Larry stood up and looked around at us. "We're a *team*. We watch each other's backs and stick up for each other. Like men. Not teasing little boys. Right?" He flicked away the stem and folded his big arms, pointing his tattoos at us.

We nodded.

Larry stretched his arms up lazily. He always wore tank tops, or T-shirts with the sleeves cut off, and his armpit hair was like his head hair, blond and straight. "Let's run a few drills." He sent two boys to the sports shed for soccer balls and cones. During the drills I only proved to Larry that my nickname was pretty accurate, but with him watching, no one teased me.

After leagues it was time for snack and dismissal. I was waiting for my bus, eating a root beer Popsicle, when Perry came up behind me, hitting my forearm to make me drop the ice pop. "You better not screw us up, klutz," he hissed, walking away as I stared at the brown slush melting into the dirt.

But the biggest threat to Larry's leagues dynasty wasn't my klutziness. It was Team 3, coached by a new counselor, Neil, a star lacrosse player at a posh prep school. He was probably working at Breezewood for something to put on his college applications. Word around camp, though, was that he was determined to break Larry's headlock on the championship. We played Neil's team in soccer for our second game.

During games, Larry never yelled, just making adjustments and substitutions as needed, occasionally pointing out a weakness in the other team's defense. But Neil was berserk from

the moment the game started, sprinting up and down the field, constantly yelling at his players from the sideline. He'd even devised actual plays and would occasionally scream out "Blue Eagle!" or "Falcon 3!"

Our team had one play: get the ball to Doron and get out of his way.

Doron—rhymes with "moron"—was a small, wiry sixth-grader with swarthy skin and a crew cut. For the first few days of camp his nickname was "Doron the Moron," actually, because he talked in a thick Israeli accent and slightly broken English. But one day at lunch, when someone called him the nickname, Doron lashed out like a rattlesnake, his fist connecting hard with the boy's mouth. By the time a counselor yanked Doron off the bleeding, crying boy, everyone had learned not to tease him anymore. And when leagues started we learned something else: Doron had grown up playing soccer on the streets of Tel Aviv and was a demon on the field, always running full speed, lunging and diving, getting the ball kicked right in his face and bouncing up a second later. But Neil's team had Breezewood's best overall athlete, Kendall, and their goalie was exceptional, leaping high to block shots that seemed like surefire goals.

I had sat out for most of the first half, watching intently: the drama on the field, the clashing personalities of Neil and Larry—it was like a show to me. But now other players needed rest, so I edged nervously onto the field when the second half started. Neil had ordered double-coverage on Perry, and triple on Doron, and it didn't seem like anyone else on our team had a chance of scoring on their goalie. At one point the ball rolled toward me while I was near the goal.

"Shoot it! *Shoot!*" Perry screamed.

I swung my foot hard, but only brushed the ball with the side of my sneaker and it rolled out of bounds. Neil's players didn't even try to cover me after that. Even worse, a few minutes later, a cluster of boys scuffled for the ball, which suddenly flew toward me. I threw my hands up to protect myself and heard a shrill whistle—a handball. Kendall took the penalty shot and scored.

"I'm sorry," I sniveled to Larry, hanging my head in shame. "It was an accident."

He shrugged away the blunder, examining my wrist with surprising gentleness. "You want to get some ice?"

My wrist didn't even hurt, but I nodded, happy to get away from the game. I trotted to Nurse Minnick's trailer and she put an ice pack on my wrist. "Can I sit here for a minute?" I asked. Nurse Minnick herself was a bigger woman with hair shaped like a Valentine's heart around her head, big bangs sweeping over her eyebrows.

"Sure. But *shh*—I'm in the middle of my show."

For the next twenty minutes I sat in the air-conditioned trailer and watched *Guiding Light* on a little TV set. Nurse Minnick was eating vanilla wafers and gave me a few with a paper cup of water. I knew the soap opera was for women, but the melodrama lured me in and helped me forget about the soccer game until it was time for dismissal.

Perry's expression as we waited for the busses told me they'd lost.

"I didn't mean to do it," I said, holding out my Popsicle, still wrapped in soggy wax paper. "Do you want this?"

He just shook his head and sulked off to his bus.

The next Monday, Larry asked me to help him set up for our team's softball game. As we gathered balls and bats from the sports shed, he asked me why I came to Breezewood.

"My parents make me."

"What do you like to do?"

"Um—I like to read. And I like theater. You know, acting."

"We have theater here," Larry said, his lazy drawl suddenly aroused. "Becca does it."

"It's for the girls," I muttered. Leagues were for the boys and Drama was for the girls—that's how it worked at Breezewood. Another tradition was the annual talent show, put on by a troupe of girls on the last day of camp.

At leagues practice the next day, Larry set the boys to a drill and then motioned for me to follow him to the Rec Center. We went into the dim, musty auditorium where Drama was held.

I sat down in the back row with Larry, who said he'd talked to Becca. "She could use some help for the talent show," he said. "An assistant director."

"But—I'm supposed to be at leagues."

Larry ran his hand through his messily-parted hair. "You know, Jer', when I was your age, I didn't get to go to camp."

It was strange to think of big, burly Larry as a boy. I asked him what he had done during the summers.

"I played in the street," Larry answered, chuckling. "Anyway, Jer', as long as you *are* here, you should have fun. If you don't like leagues, just do something else."

"But if Bruce—"

Larry chuffed. "What, you think Nosejob is gonna kick you out? Your folks pay a lot for you to be here."

It wasn't really Bruce I was afraid of, though. "When kids find out—"

Larry raised his eyebrows. "You're on *my* team." He stood up. "Now come on."

Becca, the Drama director, was the pretty "hippie" of Breezewood, slender but curvy, with long dark hair always tied back with a blue bandana. Her tanned skin and arched eyebrows gave her an exotic, feline look: every counselor had a crush on her. Becca wore billowy sundresses or colorful shirts with weird band names, a fat hemp necklace, and was usually barefoot. For Friday barbeques she'd bring in a veggie burger. I think she was going into her senior year of high school that fall.

"Jeremy's a theater expert," Larry said, patting my shoulder. "He'll make this the best talent show ever." Then he and Becca stepped away to chat for a minute. I couldn't hear much, but at one point Larry said something about Nosejob and Becca laughed hard. Before they parted, he swatted her backside playfully and winked.

Becca never asked me about leagues or exactly why I wanted to help with the talent show. She just told me this was her third time directing it and was disappointed by the lukewarm reception every summer. "The boys don't even watch it," she complained, which was true: the only people in the audience paying any attention were parents, mostly mothers, who came to watch their daughters dance and lip-sync. "So whatever ideas you have—speak up."

I nodded. Then Becca clapped her hands for attention. "Girls! Say hello to Jeremy."

"Hello, Jeremy," the girls sing-songed, tittering.

"Jeremy's our assistant director," Becca said. "He's a theater expert. That means you listen to him just like you listen to me."

"I'm tough but fair," I quipped, feeling unusually confident and getting a laugh.

Becca clapped again. "Let's show him 'Welcome Breezewood'"—which opened every year's show. Except for Bruce, no one liked the trite song, and the girls were visibly bored singing it. Then I watched a run-through of this year's acts until it was time for dismissal.

Larry found me as I waited for my bus. "Want to come back to leagues?"

"No—I like it," I said. "Becca's nice."

He winked. "I know."

That evening, ideas to improve the talent show whizzed through my mind until way past my bedtime. My mother noticed my bleariness the next morning, but I didn't say anything about the show: maybe she'd call the camp and force me to play in leagues. Anyway, I liked having it as my secret.

For the first time in four summers I actually looked forward to the bus driving me to Breezewood. I would count the minutes until leagues—and then sneak off for rehearsal, where my excitement became a businesslike perfectionism. My suggestions became bolder, too, as I realized that Becca, like Larry, didn't care much for Breezewood's traditions.

I even proposed cutting "Welcome Breezewood" from the show. Years ago, some counselors had rewritten the song into "Smelly Breezewood," about the camp's festering

dumpsters, the swimming pool chlorine, the fetid Porta-Potties—

“What if we sang *that* instead?” I knew the boys would get a kick out of it. “We could end the show with it and surprise everybody. Especially Nosejob.”

Becca smiled at me. “Let’s see what the girls think.”

They liked the idea but were worried about getting in trouble.

“*Trouble?*” I cried out. “It’s the last day of camp—the last *hour!*”

After some cajoling, the vote became unanimous in favor of “Smelly Breezewood,” and we set to work transcribing the lyrics, adding a new line about Bruce’s coconut sunblock. This was even more fun than playing theater with the girls in my neighborhood.

Before we scampered out of the auditorium, Becca gave me a tight hug. “You did great today.” Then she lowered her voice. “Hey, Jeremy—was it really Larry’s idea to bring you here?”

I nodded. “I just told him I liked acting.”

Becca adjusted her bandana. “He’s a good coach.”

During dismissal Larry praised my idea about adding “Smelly Breezewood” to the show. “Nice one,” he laughed, through a mouthful of grape Popsicle.

“How do you know?”

He winked at me.

“Well, don’t tell anyone. It’s a surprise.”

Larry zipped his purplish lips and walked away. Shortly after, as my bus rumbled through the parking lot, I saw Becca slide into Larry’s dusty maroon pickup truck. A second later he handed her a cigarette or, as I think about it now, maybe a joint.

It was inevitable that my new elective would be found out: what twenty girls anywhere can keep a secret? And one day at lunch a boy on Neil’s team—a stubby-looking kid I think was named Sammy—lumbered over and poked my shoulder. “I heard you like playing theater with the girls,” he sneered. “You a faggot? You a homo?”

I wish I had punched him right in the stomach. He wasn’t even bigger than me. But I just looked down at my peanut butter sandwich, vowing a Swim Strike.

“I asked you a question, *homo*,” he continued, squeezing my juice-box so fruit punch squirted onto my sandwich.

Suddenly I heard a crackle of twigs and felt a rush of movement behind me. I flinched and saw a red blur—then Sammy was lying on his side, Perry standing over him.

“Leave him alone, dickhead.”

Whatever Perry had done, Sammy didn’t just topple over. He’d been lifted clear off his feet and hit the ground hard. Now he scrambled upright, rubbing his elbow and balling his fists. Pieces of mulch clung to his shirt like tassels.

“You want to fight?” Perry asked. “Come on.”

“Screw *you*,” Sammy seethed, his voice breaking. “Homos.” Then he stalked away.

I looked up at Perry questioningly.

“You’re on my team,” he grunted. He walked away and came back a minute later with half of a turkey sandwich, dropping it gruffly next to my ruined one. “Here.”

“Thanks,” I said, softly.

As Perry walked away again he looked over at a nearby picnic table—at Larry, sitting next to a girl counselor with her leg draped over his knee.

Larry caught Perry's eye and nodded, approvingly, a slow, heavy nod, like a garage door closing. Then Larry turned his attention back to the girl.

I bit into the turkey-and-mustard sandwich. My mother only packed me peanut butter: she thought deli meat would spoil without refrigeration in the few hours from leaving home to lunchtime. But Perry's turkey didn't taste rotten at all.

The days passed and the talent show progressed. My sister found out my secret, too, but didn't tell our parents after I threatened to tell them about her make-out sessions on the bus rides home. During rehearsals, I focused my attention on "Smelly Breezewood" and a skit of seven girls acting out a popular parody song, while Becca choreographed dances to a boy-band pop song and a doo-wop tune. Things seemed to be going well—until a couple days later, when Bruce came into the auditorium and beckoned me over.

I looked at Becca nervously. "It's all right," she soothed. "Just see what he wants."

When I got to Bruce, he frowned at me. "Aren't you supposed to be at leagues, Jeremy?"

Becca rushed to my side. "It's fine, Bruce. Larry knows he's here."

Bruce led her a few steps away. They only talked for a minute before Becca looked at me sadly and walked back to the stage.

"Let's go, Jeremy." Bruce put a warm, hairy hand on my shoulder.

"Where?"

"To *leagues*. You can't just make up your own schedule. It doesn't work like that."

Like a prisoner being led back to a cell, I

followed Bruce to the basketball court, where my team was playing Neil's. When Bruce reached the court he confronted Larry. "*Everyone plays*. That's how it works. Or no one plays. Understand?"

Larry just nodded, unruffled as usual by Bruce, and subbed me in, but when the game restarted, I saw him whisper something to Doron, who sprinted away at top speed.

I was standing at the edge of the concrete, trying to stay out of my teammates' way. "Jeremy!" Bruce called out. "Come on now! Get in the game!"

Then Doron zipped back toward the court—with Becca and the talent show girls trailing behind him. As they got close, they started to chant.

"We want *Jer-e-my!* We want *Jer-e-my!*"

The girls tromped onto the court, halting the game. Becca clapped her hands. "Show Jeremy the new move for 'Come and Go!'"—our doo-wop dance number. And right there on the basketball court, four girls split into pairs and did a little jitterbug step. Everyone was too amazed to do anything, except Larry, who, to our even greater amazement, did the jitterbug with Becca before sauntering over to Bruce.

"Jeremy's the assistant director of the talent show." Larry spoke in a hard tone, towering over Bruce. "He can either do that in the auditorium—or out here." He looked over at Neil. "What do you say, sport? Want to watch girls dance, or play some ball?"

Bruce blew his whistle at the girls. "Go back to the auditorium," he ordered, his furry eyebrows scrunched in anger.

Instantly they resumed: "We want *Jer-e-my!* We want *Jer-e-my!*"

"*Enough*," Bruce snapped, silencing the girls.

He called me over and leaned down, speaking close to me through coffee breath. "You *want* to help with the show?"

I nodded.

Bruce huffed and pointed his finger in my face. "Next time—you ask me first."

The game resumed and Becca and the girls stayed at the court to be cheerleaders. And I'd like to think they gave our team a little extra pep, because we won by two points, handing Neil his first loss of the season. At the final whistle, Larry picked up Becca and twirled her around so fast that her yellow sundress blew up.

During dismissal, Perry clapped me playfully on the neck. I expected some teasing, which, to be fair, would have been justified. It's hardly the dream of *any* 11-year-old boy to be rescued from playing basketball by a squadron of jitterbugging girls. "That wasn't my idea," I said. "Really."

Perry just slung his duffle bag over his shoulder, still grinning. "It was funny. And we *won*. We beat Neil." He jabbed my shoulder playfully. "And I saw Becca's underwear."

At our next rehearsal, I noticed a group of girls gathered around Molly, a little brunette fifth-grader with short curly hair, a pasty white face, and dark, squinty eyes. She'd found a whistle in the prop box and was pacing back and forth stiffly. "Everyone plays," she mimicked in a nasally voice, as the girls laughed hysterically. "That's how it works at Breezewood."

I laughed too. *This* was most dramatic talent I'd seen all summer—but it wasn't an act in the show. Molly said she didn't want to do it in front of the whole camp. So I took her on a walk through the Rec Center and told her about when

Larry urged me to skip leagues and help direct the talent show. "I was afraid of being teased, too. But you know what ended up happening?"

Molly drank from a rusty water fountain. "What?" she asked, wiping her mouth.

"Now no one teases me at all." I looked her in the eye. "Mol'—you *have* to do your impression for the show. It'd be the best part." I assured her it wouldn't *just* be her in the act: we'd write a skit. "When you're good at something, you should share it with people. That's what a talent show is."

A little later I was sitting in a circle with Molly and six other girls, scripting our new act. We also wrote impressions of the Nature lady rhapsodizing about a gnat and Nurse Minnick tending to a horribly-mangled camper with ice packs and vanilla wafers.

After rehearsal Becca praised me lavishly, kissing both my cheeks. "Are you Larry's girlfriend?" I asked, wiping off her sparkly lip gloss. Yesterday I'd seen her get in Larry's truck again after camp.

"No," she said, dropping her eyes and adjusting the straps of her sundress. "He just drives me home sometimes."

Leagues playoffs went as expected and our team was slated to play Neil's in the championship soccer game. Meanwhile, I worked with Molly. "Don't just stand there," I directed. "It was funnier when you imitated Bruce's walk."

The next day I brought in a pair of my dad's tall white socks. When Molly tried them on, the tops covered her knees entirely. "Perfect," I laughed, putting a Breezewood cap and the whistle on her. The final touch was a pair of novelty

Groucho glasses—thick black rims attached to a big plastic nose, though I'd trimmed off the bushy moustache since Bruce was clean-shaven. "And take this." I gave her a tube of sunblock.

Molly did her stiff-legged walk across the stage. "Everyone plays. That's how it works at Breezewood. Now, excuse me, gentlemen, I need to put on my sunblock." She pantomimed smearing the sunblock on the plastic nose.

"Yes!" I called out, clapping. "Just like that!" Becca was laughing so hard she couldn't even yell out words of praise.

The talent show was on Friday—but Thursday was the event Breezewood was really buzzing about, the final showdown between Larry and Neil. Lunch period was filled with trash-talk and when Perry got into a shoving match with a boy from Neil's team, Bruce convened us for a lecture. "One more fight—and I'll cancel the game. Understand, gentlemen?"

We mumbled in agreement.

"And by the way," Bruce warned, "*everyone* plays today." He glanced at me. "There's no rehearsal during the game."

Bruce was right: the championship game was the only thing going on at Breezewood during that time period. It wasn't fair, though. For the past month my team had been playing, and winning, without me—it wasn't lost on me that my assistant director gig had helped Larry and the team, too. Now they would have to adjust, which could cost them the match.

A minute later Larry came by and asked us what activity we had next.

"Ga-Ga," Perry said.

"Well, be careful. I want you tip-top for the game."

Suddenly an idea came to me, and once Larry was gone, I pitched it to Perry, who smiled and looked at me with something like respect.

Ga-Ga was a variation of dodgeball played with a bouncy maroon playground ball in an octagon court of waist-high wooden sides around a hard patch of dirt: imagine a shallow above-ground pool filled with dust instead of water. You could only hit the ball with your hands and if it hit you anywhere below your knees, you were "out."

As our group gathered for Ga-Ga, Perry and I snuck off behind the sports shed. He kept lookout while I used a thorny stick to scratch my knee, making white scaly lines before mustering the nerve to break the skin. A minute later I showed Perry the bloody mess. "Gross," he said, impressed.

Then we sprinted toward the Ga-Ga court, which didn't have a door, so kids would either vault over the side, or climb over gently, like I always did. But not today. Today I ran, really ran, harder than I had ever run in my life, and when I reached the side of the court, I made my jump, deliberately dragging my foot to fall flat on my face. It was probably the most athletic move I've ever made, sadly enough, and it hurt for real—but I still hammed it up, rolling around in the dirt, wailing and hyperventilating as the boys roared with laughter and chanted "Captain Klutz."

When Danny saw the blood, he told me to go right to Nurse Minnick, who cleaned off my knee and dressed it with a big square bandage. She gave me an ice pack and a few vanilla wafers and we hushed up for *Guiding Light*.

Twenty minutes later I limped out of the

trailer for the championship game. At the soccer field, a few counselors were dragging out collapsible metal bleachers while the maintenance man shook powdered chalk onto the grass to make fresh white boundary lines. I found my team sitting in the shade with Larry.

"What happened to *you*?" Larry asked.

"Ga-Ga." The boys didn't seem surprised at my injury and a few of them grinned—Perry must have told. "I won't be able to play."

Larry gently pulled the bandage out to look at the wound. "Must've hurt."

"I'm on your team," I whispered in his ear.

Then Neil arrived, his players walking behind him in a crisp orderly line. He scanned over our team and raised his eyebrows at my bandaged knee.

Larry smiled coolly. "Ga-Ga. Shame, isn't it? He won't be able to play."

Neil rolled his eyes—but tipped his cap in grudging respect of the gamesmanship. "Larry Leagues," he murmured. Then he led his team to the other side of the field.

When the bleachers were filled up with campers and counselors, Bruce announced the championship game and introduced the teams. When he noticed me sitting on the grass with my bandaged knee, he frowned suspiciously—but what could he do, force an injured kid onto the field?

Then the game began. Right from the start everyone was engrossed by the intense competition. Larry was his usual stolid self, but Neil sprinted back and forth, screaming and directing every play with wild gesticulations. "Take it—*take it*, Kendall!" Doron, though, playing like a rabid bobcat, not only contained Neil's best

player but even managed to boot in a goal. Becca and the girls cheered so hard I worried about them losing their voices for tomorrow.

The first half ended with us ahead by a goal, but in the second half Neil's team tied the game with their "Blue Eagle" play. Every player had lust in his eyes and the audience was riveted. Even Bruce was shifting back and forth on his bright white sneakers.

When the final whistle blew, the game was still tied, so Bruce called for a shoot-out. Kendall and Perry took the first kicks and both scored. Our next three shooters couldn't score, though, and when Doron jogged onto the field to take our final shot, Neil's team was ahead by a goal. If Doron scored, we'd do another five shots. If not, the game was over.

Breezewood was silent as a gnat when Doron set the ball behind an orange cone and readied himself. Then *thud*—the ball zoomed toward the goal, slicing through the air like a black-and-white comet—but an inch too high. It clanged off the top post and leagues were over. Neil's players went crazy with victory, jumping up and down, embracing each other, and then hoisting Neil onto their shoulders.

Doron had sunk to his knees after the missed kick, sobbing and pounding the grass with his little fists. "Get your teammate," Larry ordered us. We rushed over to Doron and brought him back to the sideline, trying to console him. Larry carried him away from the field, Doron's face buried in Larry's beefy shoulder.

As the bleachers emptied, Neil's players scurried away to keep celebrating. My team quietly gathered up our water bottles and waited for dismissal. None of us were in the mood for

Popsicles. During the ride home, I stared out the window, sad about the loss, but just as much relieved I hadn't been the cause of it. When my sister asked about my knee, I told her I'd tripped playing Ga-Ga.

She fluttered her eyes. "You really *are* Captain Klutz."

Then it was the last day of camp. Just after the lunchtime barbeque started, Larry disappeared toward the parking lot, which I didn't think much of, until Perry rushed up beside me. "Come on," he whispered. "Larry wants us."

I rushed to meet the rest of Team 6 in the parking lot. A minute later, Larry rumbled up in his truck and told us to hop in—"Pronto." We scrambled into the truck bed and held on to the sides, laughing at every bump as Larry drove to a nearby pizzeria. He came out with four pizza boxes and a few two-liter bottles of soda. Then we zoomed back to the Breezewood parking lot and Larry joined us in the dusty truck bed.

Pizza and soda never tasted better. We didn't have any cups and drank right from the bottles, passing them around like medieval grog. It didn't even feel like Larry was a counselor or our coach—just a camper happily stuffing himself with pizza in the back of a truck.

No one talked for a few minutes. The parking lot was near silent and the sun had moved behind a scrim of clouds. Larry looked around at us and nodded approvingly. "Hell of a team this year," he said, picking up a bottle of root beer and downing the last third of it in two gulps. For a moment or two, his expression changed from its usual cocky defiance into something else, something wistful, something watching the

summer evaporate into another nine months away from Breezewood.

If Larry had more to say, we never got to hear it. Suddenly Bruce was beside the truck, vibrating with fury, his face blazing crimson. I'd never seen him this angry.

"Boys—out of the truck. Go find your groups."

We filed out quickly. From across the parking lot we could hear Nosejob hollering about accidents and lawsuits, but we were still bubbly from the field trip, and the soda, battling each other in burping contests as we strutted back onto the camp grounds.

That afternoon everyone assembled in the auditorium for the talent show. The boys of Team 6 sat in the first row and Larry was leaning against the wall near the stage. Once everyone was settled into the squeaky wooden seats, the show started.

Molly's impression of Bruce was the highlight, obviously. "That's how it works at Breezewood," she lectured in the nasally voice, after the howls died down. Even Bruce was forcing himself to smile.

"Smelly Breezewood" was another hit and the audience joined in for an encore rendition. I had stayed backstage until then, but before the finale I snuck away to watch from the first row. When the show ended, Becca and the girls came out, holding hands and glowing in the ovation like a string of Christmas lights. Becca nudged Molly forward and the applause swelled even louder.

When Becca announced me as the assistant director and beckoned me to the stage, I shook my head modestly—but Perry pulled me to my feet, and suddenly Larry was lifting me up,

toward the stage, practically throwing me onto it. I stood next to Becca as Team 6 chanted my name.

And then camp was over. I signed a bunch of Breezewood T-shirts and a bunch of campers signed mine. But in the hectic rush of final dismissal I couldn't find Larry to say goodbye, and when my bus drove through the parking lot, the shady spot in the back corner was empty.

When I showed up at Breezewood the next summer, Perry rushed to tell me the big news: Larry wasn't a counselor anymore. Perry didn't know why, although there were plenty of reasons why Larry wouldn't have been rehired. It was a miracle he'd kept the job as long as he did.

At lunch I asked my sister. She'd heard that after last summer ended, a girl counselor told Bruce that Larry had put his hands inside her bathing suit when he picked her up in the pool to throw her. She hadn't returned to Breezewood.

Elissa fluttered her eyes. "Perv."

"He is not."

"He was always touching some girl."

Becca, who'd cut her hair boyishly short, had heard the rumors about Larry, but she hadn't seen him since last summer and didn't know any more than I did. "He was a good coach," she said, glancing down uneasily. That was the last she ever mentioned him, at least to me.

I never learned exactly why Larry didn't come back to camp. Maybe the rumor was true, or maybe he just wanted to make more money. But as it turned out, even without Larry, that summer was my best one so far at Breezewood. My counselor didn't care that I skipped most of my sports activities to hang out at Drama with

Becca, or read by the pool. Once in a while I'd pop in to Nurse Minnick's trailer for an episode of Guiding Light. Perry and I were friendly and often reminisced about Larry. Sometimes we even traded sandwiches. I didn't do a Swim Strike all summer.

Bruce hadn't returned, either. The new camp director was named Amy, who had a pretty face, a big backside, and a gentle voice always reminding everyone about "appropriate behavior." Amy instituted leagues for girls, and boys' leagues weren't like the old days. No one cared about the championship game that summer.

Amy also changed the talent show into "Broadway at Breezewood." Boys could participate, too—no one was turned away, even campers who couldn't act at all, which I wasn't so thrilled about. That summer we put on an abbreviated production of Grease and one afternoon Becca and I went to a thrift shop for costumes and props. At the shop, I watched Becca try on some sundresses, thinking how jealous Perry would be that I was seeing her in just her underwear.

That was my last summer at Breezewood. The next spring, I convinced my parents to send me to drama camp, where I went every summer until I graduated high school. Then I packed off to study theater in Philadelphia, where I had my first boyfriend, my first love, my first heartbreak. After junior year I finally told my parents I was, as that camp bully had called me, "a homo." I'd never really liked the name "Jeremy" and started going by "Jerry."

I stayed in Philadelphia after college, acting and directing for a few years before joining a fledgling theater company as its artistic

director. The company won a prestigious Barrymore award, but struggled financially and had to close down. That's when I heard that New Jersey's venerable old Carter Theater was hiring a resident director. We mostly put on classic dramas and musicals, a bit conservative for my tastes, but little by little I'm pushing beyond our traditional repertoire.

So that brings me back here, in the break room. As I finished my sandwich, I wondered what Perry was doing these days. If I still knew his last name, I might have looked him up to tell him about Larry—Perry always did like gossip. This was juicy stuff, too. Surrounding the mugshot were a few informative paragraphs. The girl, seventeen, had told the sheriff it was consensual,

but this was Larry's second time being charged with the offense. He'd spent nine months in jail the first time. He never was much for rules.

I folded up the newspaper and dropped it in the recycle bin. I'd only opened it in the first place because I'd left my phone charging near the stage. It was pure chance to see the article, like it was pure chance to end up on his leagues team so he could toss me onto that stage with Becca and the girls. A caring counselor emboldening me to be myself—right?—even if that's not all it was. Anyway, I won't forget what I saw in the paper today. I'd just rather remember those moments, so fast evaporating, when Larry was one of us boys, stuffed with pizza and chugging root beer in the back of a dusty pickup truck.



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