

## Low Tide

by

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Three o'clock in the morning is when you'll find your soul at low tide. I believe that. I experience that feeling of low tide every night of my life. While the rest of the world sleeps, I stand here, contemplating this world, contemplating the being of it, wondering which of the infinite paths of life will come next, and the paths that I've already traversed. The rest of the world sleeps, yet I stand here alone, my thoughts lucid, perhaps more lucid than any other hour registered on that neon clock that hangs over the deserted bar. Lucid, now perhaps that's not exactly what I mean, but truthful, damned truthful. If you want to get down to the soul of things, to their very nature and being, just wait until the hours tick down to three o'clock. Try lying to yourself then. The truth always bubbles to the surface.

I pushed the last of the drunken patrons out forty-five minutes ago, and finished up what little closing duties I had left: wiped down every last splinter of oak, emptied every ashtray, thrown away every discarded napkin with a phone number scribbled in ink; the only evidence of a liaison which never quite materialized. Two hours ago the bar was packed, a game being played on every table, music blaring from the jukebox, lungs being blackened as hearts and minds were self-medicated with the timeless elixir of alcohol.

Now the bar was all mine, and I stood alone, staring out over the faded green felt of the twelve pool tables, a shimmering haze of smoke still visible under the dim table lights. The jukebox finally lay silent, and the neon lights of the beer signs seemed to haunt the hall. There were still some balls left on table nine, and I grabbed my Mali cue and wandered over to it

lackadaisically, chalked the tip, and sank them slowly one by one with the precision of a surgeon.

Why didn't I collect my things and leave this lonely place, step out into the cool November night to be free of the chains that bound me? Because I loved those chains. They were all I had. Those ever-ready chains, keeping me anchored down to a reality that I understood, that kept my life in focus. Vaillancourt Billiards *was* my life. It was the defining characteristic of it. If I didn't have that, then what did I have?

I walked back to the bar and sat down on the one of the leather stools that had been here for over twenty years. My eyes surveyed the backbar, falling over those same items which I had seen a thousand times before, just like old friends. Rows and rows of liquor looked back at me from behind the bar, the television set mounted in the corner was dark and quiet after a night of repetitive ESPN headlines and football highlights, neon cigarette signs and the old chalkboard which still had my deceased grandfather's meticulous three-year-old handwriting on it. I didn't have the heart to erase it, and wasn't sure I ever would. And then there they were, far above them all, beyond the Patron and Johnny Walker, the Grey Goose and Wild Turkey, a visual history going back over a century. They were hung along the back wall, almost unnoticeable unless you were looking for them, and they were a narrative of the clan Vaillancourt. My clan.

The oldest photographs were browned with age and faded, yet still discernable. My great-great grandfather, Etienne Vaillancourt, an *émigré* and the man who first opened this bar in 1893, standing proudly in front of the hall on the day it opened. His daughter Marie, her hair pulled into a tight bun, her face stern as she stared into the camera lens. She'd ran this bar until influenza cut her down in 1918. Then there was my grandfather, Jack, smiling in the black and white photo taken in 1951, leaning against one of the tables with his Mali pool cue in his hand,

the same cue that now belonged to me. He'd started tending bar during the Dustbowl, younger than I am now, and kept the place in business for the last seventy years; through Prohibition, depressions, oil booms and busts, men landing on the moon, zoning restrictions, one minor fire, and seventy-three World Series, not including the strike year of course.

The only prominent member of the clan missing was my father, for reasons of his own. That left only me, only I didn't have any pictures or portraits hanging above the bar with the other ghosts of the oldest surviving business in Amber Ridge, Texas. My story was told in words, in the black and white smudges of newsprint, just beginning to fade with age. I found myself stepping up from the stool and walking around the bar, reading the familiar headlines one more time, as if the denouement might be different if I read them only one more time. *Pitching Prodigy Leads to Victory at Williamsport. Vaillancourt Allows Two Hits in LLWS Victory. Freshmen Flamethrower Clocks 88 on Gun. Sophomore Vaillancourt Top Prospect. Vaillancourt's Fastball Dominates District Championship. Draft or College the Choice for Vaillancourt.*

And then I came to the final article framed on that wall, my favorite of all, which read: *Vaillancourt Pitches First Perfect Game in Tigers' History.* I pulled the frame down and glanced over the article just as I had hundreds of times before. I studied the faded photograph in black and white, the image of myself standing on the mound frozen forever as I began my windup, that look of utmost intensity in my eyes. Looking up into the backbar mirror at my reflection, the only thing I saw in my eyes now was emptiness. The fierce competitor of five years ago was no more, and my empty blue eyes were all that was left; a little older, a little sadder, a little more cynical, and perhaps a little wiser.

I replaced the frame with all the other ghosts of Vaillancourt's Billiards and grabbed a tray of balls and my Mali and walked to table nine, my favorite table. Spreading the balls out randomly over those nine feet of felt, I chalked the tip of my cue and stood staring at the table, my left palm resting on the wood and my nostrils filled with the smell of stale cigarette smoke. I grabbed the cue ball in my hand, gripped it as I would a fastball, feeling the smooth surface of it, so different from the roughness and threads of a hardball. Placing the ball back on the felt, I began pocketing the balls around the table.

Of course I was nearly as good at pool as I had been at pitching. Growing up in a pool hall will do that to you. But it was never with the same passion on the felt that I'd had on that diamond; standing on a mound all alone, the batter digging into the box, he and I facing each other down, wondering which was going to blink first. Most times, I got the better of that nameless batter. Going into my windup, kicking my right leg high into the air, stepping forward and releasing: I could put the ball wherever I wanted. Dancing on the corners, freezing hitters inside, pulling the string on a perfect curve, making them look foolish with my changeup, getting them to swing on high heat...I could do it all, and did it all. Sometimes I'd just torch one right down the middle to see if they could catch up to it. Rarely could they. Let me tell you that there is no feeling in this world like freezing up a number three hitter with an inside fastball just hitting the corner. Those days seemed so distant to me now.

And none better than that April day, the ultimate day, the day I'd faced twenty-seven batters and sent them all back down to their dugout. I'd always had good control, but that day I transcended the game like I'd never done. The world seemed to slow down, I couldn't hear the noises in the stands, the coaches, the chatter from the field, the hitters on deck. Nothing. It was just me and the ball, inhabiting a world all our own. Even when I faced the final batter, I felt no

nerves. I struck him out on three pitches. The only thing I remember was the sound of the wind in the old oak trees beyond the outfield fence, and the smells of spring in Texas. I was able to block everything out like I'd never had before...including that ominous pain.

Oh, it was there, I know it was. The tenderness and inflammation had sprung into existence two starts previously, and I thought nothing of it. I dealt with pain constantly. Pitching's very destructive, and I expected it to come with the job. How was I to know that that pain was different? How was I to see that very fine line, so very indiscernible, separating true grit from true, life-altering danger?

One month later to the day was when I heard the snap in my elbow.

Warming up before my start on that fateful day, feeling my arm heat up after a few tosses, I dialed up my fastball like I'd done a hundred times before in the bullpen. The second I released it, I knew. In that flashing nanosecond I knew, as I stood there and the primal howl of pain escaped my lips, clutching my left elbow with my glove hand...I knew it over. I knew even before the doctor told me the three most terrifying words a pitcher in this day and age could hear: Tommy John surgery, especially a pitcher that's seventeen years old.

Passion is a strange thing. I've thought so much about passion over these years, I feel like I'm almost an expert on it. Late at night, here in this empty pool hall, my soul drifting out like the tide and my thoughts deeper than any ocean, I reflect on the passions of this life. Some men never have it. They have desire, oh certainly, but not passion, that supreme driving virtue that leads men to their true greatness. My father, for example. His only desire was for the bottle. But then there were men like my grandfather, a man literally born in the back of a pool hall who grew up with the game of billiards and loved it, cherished it, respected it. The back office was

full of his trophies and accolades. He had a passion for life and an equally passionate affair with the game on the felt.

Every night for the past five years I'd stood behind the bar and studied my patrons and wondered what passions they had in their lives, what moved them, if anything. The truck drivers, the migrant workers, the locals, the kids I'd known in high school that had never escaped the city limits of Amber Ridge; they had all entered this place at one time or another to be inspected under my watchful eye. Were any of them ever as passionate as I was about baseball?

Inevitably I went through bouts of depression after the injury, graduation, and the everyday realities of my new life set in. Talk about scholarships and drafts withered and faded away like the dying leaves in autumn. Word got around quickly that I was declining surgery and my stock plummeted. What was the point, really? My arm would be renewed, but not the same, and chances were I'd just need yet another surgery in time. Who was going to take a chance on damaged goods, no matter what untapped promise might lurk within, especially on someone as young as I was? No longer did the old timers talk about how I was next in the line of succession to the great Texas pitchers. How one day the name Johnny Vaillancourt from right here in Amber Ridge would resonate with those of Nolan Ryan, Roger Clemens, or Josh Beckett. It seemed I had already been anointed the next great lefty, as if my destiny has already been carved into Cooperstown. Funny old beings, those Baseball Gods. I found I was left with no choice but the one I was born with, the one I tried so desperately to escape for the first seventeen years of my life. I'd searched for any elixir that would ease my pain, but found them to be poor medicine. There is nothing that can heal a broken soul, only time, and if there is one it's certainly not found within the bottles of grain and rye.

So many nights I kept backtracking, kept wondering where it was along the line that I went wrong. I searched for reasons why this fell upon me and not someone else. Was it punishment for something I'd done? For the arrogance I took with me onto the mound? Was I serving time in some sort of purgatory for some unknown sin? Maybe for that pine tar I sometimes snuck into my glove when my curve ball wasn't breaking enough. Or perhaps for not listening to my little league coach warning me whenever he saw me throw a breaking pitch. Had I overdone it somewhere? Taken my arm further than it would go? Pushed my limits too far? Of course, all of these thoughts were ridiculous and any conclusions beyond moot. I knew the answer to all my questions. I knew exactly why my arm blew out...it wasn't hubris but my own DNA. Somewhere in the mysteries of that double helix, I was destined to still be here perpetuating the business my immigrant great-great grandfather brought into being over a century ago. He had put his blood into this place, the blood that ran through my veins, and it was that very same blood that kept me tethered here, perhaps forever.

Yes, I was an expert on passion. I'd been granted one great passion in my life, and now it was gone. It's a sad thing to see passion die in a man. I'd seen my fair share of passions that had died out in the atrophy this town seemed to permeate with. Time and the degradation that life's realities can put upon a person is a sad enough thing to witness, but it's quite another thing to have your passion taken from you, ripped from you, amputated like a gangrenous limb. That's a truly tragic thing indeed. I was haunted by that loss, by the clean slice which fate had performed on me. I still scratched at that phantom limb, and it was at times like this, here, alone in this hall, with the other ghosts of Amber Ridge, that it itched most of all. The ghost of that pitcher still haunted me, the ghost of who I once was, who I once might have been, haunted by a passion and a promise that would never be fulfilled.

From time to time I can still smell the green grass of a freshly cut field, still see the clear blue April skies, and still hear the sound of my fastball snapping into the mitt of my catcher. The only green I had now were on the pool tables, and the smell of spring was replaced by the odiferous emanations of cigarettes and alcohol. Poor replacements indeed.

I chalked my tip and bent over table nine, and with a perfect stroke, sank the seven ball in the side pocket, putting perfect spin on the cue ball to set up for my next shot. That's when I heard the bell on the front door ringing gently through the silence. I didn't turn around, but said the word, "We're closed." As I said it, I felt my lips curl into a half-grin, for I knew exactly who it was. It was why I'd left the door unlocked in the first place.

"What're you still doing here?" she said from behind me, wrapping her small arm around my waist. I felt her tiny hand suddenly in mine, the smell of her auburn hair bringing me comfort and solace.

"Just thinking," I said, still facing the pool table.

"You think way too much," she said, pulling me around to face her.

"I know," was all I could say as I stared down into those deep brown eyes, the long fingers of my left hand caressing the skin of her cheek. I leaned forward and kissed her.

"Let's go home," she said with a smile.

All I could do was nod. My dark thoughts began slipping out of my mind, falling back to the deep recesses of my heart, where they would lay buried and wait for another lonely night to haunt me once more. It was closer to dawn now, and I felt my soul coming back in to shore, the peace and comfort of the returning tide. Like a lighthouse piercing the predawn fog, she was calling me back, summoning me back to sanity, back from the dark abyss of my mind. Indeed there were no elixirs that would cure a broken soul, but there were people in this world who

could numb the pain. A passion can die, but if you're lucky, new ones are born, and with them come hope, and a new promise of fulfillment.

Perhaps it was enough that for one spring afternoon I'd transcended myself and the game, reached the apex of the diamond like few had ever done, no matter what league they played in. Fate and the ghosts of Amber Ridge could never take that perfect game away from me. No, I'd never heard the crowds from the mound of Yankee Stadium or Wrigley, but I would always remember the sound of the winds in those old oak trees by the ballpark, and the smell of the April air on that transcendent day when I sat down twenty-seven consecutive batters. How many men possessed memories like that?

We walked to the door together, and I turned out all of the lights except for the neon signs that dotted the walls. I could feel the chill of November air outside, her warm hand in mine as I turned and locked the door, locking in the sleeping ghosts of Vaillancourt's Billiards for one more night.