

**New Math**

**850 words**

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With my friend Niko's dad the story was he played some college football. The family came from Massachusetts so probably a minor school back there, not a huge deal but still.

When Niko turned 12 he had his birthday party in a park that had a baseball diamond. There were kids out on the field, black kids from the neighborhood that was on the other side of the park. We were the rich kids from our side.

Niko's dad called in the black kids and organized a game. I was thinking he'd mix it up but he didn't, he made it us against them, with him pitching for both teams.

We played 7 innings and the game was close. In our final at-bat someone hit a comebacker to the mound and Niko's dad mishandled it and the guy's safe and another guy ends up on 3rd and we score a couple runs and win it.

We're celebrating and the black kids are mad and they

yell a few things and storm off. Niko's dad shakes his head and tells us this is what happens when you're a poor sport. He congratulated us on plays we made during the game and took us for ice cream.

No one ever brought it up, the fielding error, and at the time it didn't register funny. The black kid first baseman who was waiting for the ball with his foot on the bag kept saying 'Sir! Sir!' when Niko's dad fumbled around for it and didn't throw it.

Niko's dad had an insurance business and took care of most of our parents. There'd be a party at Niko's house around Labor Day and Niko's dad would be tossing the football around out front, perfect effortless tight spirals, and we wanted to be like that.

Then the party didn't happen one year and my mom said Niko's dad was in the hospital. She was crying, so that wasn't good. I wondered if my mom knew him better than I thought.

After Nico's dad died she told me he had a tumor on his heart as a young man, that they got rid of it and saved his life, but wrecked his heart.

I said would that make someone cheat then?

She said I have no idea what you're talking about-- and what a horrible thing to say.

Nico's family moved and we went to different high schools. Our senior year I ran into him at a church Christmas dance. He said his mom remarried and it was only okay.

I said I always liked his dad, and that was fun that time on your birthday, the park.

Nico said yeah it was, his dad was good those situations, making things work. Something he misses.

I said probably better for race relations if we lost that game, crazy to think.

Yeah what are you going to do, Niko said, and listen don't be a stranger.

His sister Ruthie was there so I asked her to dance. I said I give Niko credit, if I lost *my* dad I don't think I'd be doing great.

So what about me, she said.

It was a slow dance and I looked at her different. I said I give you credit too, and I wanted to be like your dad. Still do.

We went outside and sat in my car. She came close and I smoothed her hair and she was crying. I said this is awkward to bring up, but did your dad and my mom know each other pretty well?

She said she wouldn't be surprised, she said her dad

got around. That once a woman called and apologized to her mom, and her mom didn't know what she was apologizing for.

I said were they honest with each other?

Well obviously not.

I mean some guys it's on the table when that happens right? They don't deny it?

My mom denied it.

Did mine visit your dad in the hospital?, I said.

She said there was a lot of traffic but she saw her, sure.

She said when she and Niko were young her dad was a science teacher at a private school.

He'd be a good one, I said.

She said she met someone who had her dad. He told her a story, she said, how once in class her dad corrected another student but kept it light, never put anyone down. That was her dad.

It was, I said.

She said the story was the student asked why when you lay the back of your hand down flat it curls up. And that her dad rolled up his sleeve, laid his hand flat on the teacher's desk, waited a while, and said mine doesn't curl up. Everyone laughed.

Except the kid, I'm guessing, I said.

I looked it up, she said, muscles and tendons relaxing to the natural position.

She asked me to open the window a crack. I touched her face and kissed her.

Then I flattened my hand open on the back of the seat behind her shoulder. Mine curls up only if you let it, I said.