

**KEEPERS OF THE
FIELD**

AN INVITATION TO THE UNITIVE LIFE

ROSS HOSTETTER

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Summary: This novel is a spiritual adventure story—the journey of a man-child named Charlie Smithson who decides to leave the pinnacle of success and risk it all to become a true man. Charlie is led deep into the wilderness by a guide named Moses, where he encounters the mysterious forces of ‘The Committee,’ and is trained to become a Messenger and a Keeper of the Field. He is then abandoned, and must go on alone toward an encounter that will either destroy him, or bring him to enlightenment.

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FOR MY FAMILY

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PROLOGUE

IT WAS HER. I was sure of it. The water glistened as it poured from the long hair clinging to her back as she ran barefoot down the weathered wooden boards of the dock and into the air, turning back to smile at me from the apex of her leap; spinning with her toes pointed and her arms captured in a dancer's pirouette before she disappeared into the cold blue water.

“—If she is the one, The Field will mark her body. The Messenger has always been marked, as you well know, Cronus.”

I felt the ridges of the old scars on my left hand—the pathway of the currents of fire that had flowed into me the night when I was marked and given my true name. A pattern, like the delicate branching of fern leaves, flowed up from my fingers and flared into spirals that intertwined my forearm.

“I know. She will be strong enough. I see the light around her.”

The girl's head emerged with the audible exhale of a diver coming up from the deep. The water was thick against her shoulders as she swam toward the shore.

“—She will be tested. And she is so young, Cronus. She might not survive.”

“Her innocence will protect her. I will protect her. She is the one. She will discover who she is, and accept the mission for which she's been made.”

“—But you must not impose; you must not demand. The Rule forbids it. She must be the one to choose, and choose three times just as you did.”

“Yes.”

I walked toward the steep grassy embankment that lined the shore. There was a book with a worn leather cover in my back pocket. Inside the book were pressed leaves of aspen, and flowers in the form of stars within stars. A title was carved into the cover, now barely visible to the eye: *The Field Book*. The book held the written wisdom of The Committee—wisdom that was still in the act of being created. It could be said that the book was alive.

I reached down the embankment and extended my hand to the girl as she struggled up the slippery slope. She looked up at me and smiled as our eyes met. She had trusting eyes, with no guile. She reached up her hand. Our palms were less than a foot apart. In a moment, there would be no going back.

“—Be careful, Cronus. Be sure. When your hands touch she will be changed. It is an awful thing, the greatness that you ask of her.”

IT WAS NOT ALWAYS THIS WAY. There was a time before I was Cronus, the servant and messenger of The Committee—a time before I accepted the work of evolving this world through the power of love, link to link. There was a time when I maintained the illusion that I was separate and divided—a time before I was aware of the Field.

But now I am linked to this world cell to cell; I am this very world come alive. I have lost all desire to escape, and I will not leave until the work is finished.

It began a generation ago.

I was not so different then, in the beginning. Like this girl, I was just a child.

SHE REACHED high and our hands touched. The feeling passed between us, and her eyes became pools of light. My body remembered the first touch of a Messenger; the penetration of love,

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as if I'd been sick all my life and suddenly been made well; like I'd been asleep and suddenly awakened.

I pulled the child up the embankment, and we stood smiling into each other, leaping into the joy of growing and irreversible unity.

I am Cronus, the twenty-third Messenger. I have claimed my true name. I am the custodian of the Field Book, and a Keeper of the Field. This is my story.

PART ONE:
A CALL AND ANSWER

1: STARTING WHERE YOU ARE

The spiritual journey starts with the realization that there's nothing more to wait for. The conditions are already perfect. There is no 'something else' that needs to happen before we begin. We start exactly where we are. After all, whether now or later, this is the only place we can begin.

...*The Field Book*.

IN THE BEGINNING, my name was Charlie Smithson. I played baseball.

In the summer months before my tenth birthday, I was the back-up right fielder for the Structo Fabricating Little League squad. Structo was one of the few machine shops still open below the smokestacks of our town—a once-thriving enterprise that now faced the world as a ramble of dirty windows and corrugated siding with rusty holes that leaked sparks from the grinding wheels inside.

Our coach was the last of Structo's metal-bending men. He'd stood with his feet just this side of a painted yellow line since '68, doing the same bend on the same endless roll of hot-dipped steel for twenty years' time, ascending at last to the hydraulic press where he'd stood for six years more. The big press could punch a hole through an inch of carbon-steel plate, and Coach never got tired of watching his heavy metal being impaled. The press job was skilled labor—a

dollar thirty-six cents more per hour at union scale—and it earned the man a work station by the window where he could watch what was left of the river as it flowed past the gauntlet of discharge pipes and leaking tanks that sloped down from the chain-linked yards of the factories that lined Water Street.

His beer buddies called our coach “The Turk” or just “Turk” because of his ceaseless burning of that smelly Turkish tobacco with a camel on the pack. Turk insisted on his “God-given and Constitutional Right” to smoke everywhere, even in the Little League dugout with children present. Any suggestion that he modify his behavior for the health and welfare of children was met by The Turk with a lowering of his broad head and the downward compression of his brow in a practiced threat display that puffed his over-large chest and cheek-sacks full of righteous outrage; an outrage that he indulged in daily as an orienting emotion fueled by fuzzy images of a well-armed mob of Turk-clones storming the State House in Springfield to lay down their lives together in defense of their right to hack, spit, and enlarge their fifty-six inch waistlines.

Just for emphasis, the big man made a habit of pinching one of his coffin nails continuously between thumb and forefinger, to bear it before him with the burning end poking into the air like a fuming candle that trailed glories of toxic blue smoke in sheets and whorls. The Turk saw himself as a torch-bearer for the Structo Way, and he carried the Camel aloft into our weekly competitions as both a symbol of personal freedom and as a sacred Olympic Flame. How such a man could remain a Little League mentor was explained by a loophole in the Summer Rec. League Guidelines that allowed the team’s sponsor to name the coach. No one was left at Structo to take the coaching job, so Turk leapt at the opportunity to boss somebody else around for a change and imbue young men with the proper values.

Turk’s coaching strategy revolved around two central concepts. The first was his idea of ‘barehanding’ the ball—not using the glove to field, but instead stabbing at hot grounders with the gloveless open hand. Turk’s mission was to eliminate the oh-so-sluggish transfer

from glove to throwing hand. In theory, this would allow us to pick off more of those streaking runners with a quick, snappy throw.

Second, and more importantly, Turk had filled his mind with the idea that our season's success rested on his ability to confront the umpire about every questionable call. He believed in his heart that the man behind the mask could be entrained by shouts, false charges, and other timely challenges to make all close and not-so-close calls in favor of the Structo side. All those close calls going our way would add up to quite a sum over the course of a season, giving our squad a significant statistical advantage.

THE TURK SCHOOL OF BAREHANDED FIELDING AND UMPIRE CONFRONTATION was a boon to our opponents. By stabbing unsuccessfully at routine ground balls, our infield leaked a reliable stream of errors to the outfielders, who actually managed to pick up the hits with an open hand as they dribbled to a stop in the bumpy grass of the Rec. League field. Over time, the outfield unconsciously crept closer to form a second infield. This made us tragically vulnerable to a well-hit fly ball. But our real problem lay not with the base-clearing hits booming off the bats of our opponents. It was Turk's feeble emotional intelligence that doomed our squad to the cellar.

With confrontation on his mind, Turk had begun, starting last winter, to mechanically memorize the rules of Little League baseball as he watched his press pound steel. Those rote efforts had brought him to the single intellectual achievement of his lifetime—a nearly complete mastery of every minor technicality contained in the Blue Pocket Edition of the Little League Rules, which Turk carried as a Bible in a back pocket next to his Zippo lighter.

When the season opened, Turk proceeded with a simple plan. He first established a clear line of sight to the home plate Ump. With his narrow eyes locked on, he then settled into the role of coon dog with the hapless volunteer umpire serving as treed coon; subject to all of Turk's bay and bark and the persistent bug-eyed stare-down of a very

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large man with a smoking unfiltered in his hand. There was no peace possible in Turk's self-made umpire war, because both sides of the war were generated in Turk's own mind. And he was not without his weapons.

I GOT A pretty good look at The Turk from my seat on the bench. He had a hard time remembering a belt, and whenever he bent over, the top of his hairy white ass cheeks would ride out over the waistline of his blue Little Dickey work pants. That ragged little rule book would be there, fart-gassed and pressed hard but ready as a pistol in a greased holster—ready to be whipped out and shaken in a bellowing charge toward the home plate Ump with the rule book in one hand and a glowing unfiltered in the other. This was Turk's John Wayne charge to glory, with reins in his teeth and both hands full of manhood, bawling emotion down the third-base line.

When Turk reached the plate, he began to make offers to the Umpire: offers to “take it outside”, “to settle this like men”—and, as the situation progressed, to “pound your fucking face in”. These typically did not impress the Ump as statements which should come from one with authority over nine-year-old boys, and the Turk's charge would always end with the big man standing in humiliation on the bumper of his truck, out in the parking lot behind my personal warm spot on the bench, where all his energy would melt down, and he would collapse into an embarrassing stream of emotionally choked sounds and whimpers; a mess of whining garble that an untrained ear might interpret as a pathetic attempt to redeem himself and continue coaching the squad.

OF COURSE it wasn't always this way. I could remember a place where we once lived in the city, a place with polished floors and rugs with fringes with a big bay window that I could lie in and watch the snow as it fell to the streets and out on the big water in the distance. I was small, no more than three and a half years old and hiding under

the table in the dining room. I could only see their feet under the lace of the table cloth; the polished wing tips of my father and the black high heels of my mother. The feet were circling each other. I was on my knees in my boy-velvet Christmas pants and jacket, with my kneecaps tight together and the hard black heels of my buckle shoes biting into my bottom. My mother's black heels spun and paced and the wingtips shifted from side to side.

"You've lost it all you stupid shit!" she said. "Who's going to pay the bills on this place now? You don't have any idea what it costs to keep a child!"

There were more words that came out in a raw flurry, raising welts in the air. The word 'money' was the hardest, loudest, and most frequent word.

"Don't talk to me like that bitch! You've never done a single thing but sit here drinking while...."

There was a sound of a palm hitting a man's face, then the harder, sickening sound of the return blow. I could see the knees of my mother on the carpet. I dared not reach out to touch her.

THAT WAS THEN. Now we were here. Mom and I had moved to Prosperville to be closer to her parents. It wasn't my fault. At least that's what my mom kept telling me. "It's not your fault Charlie, it's not your fault," she would say as she combed the knots out of my hair before bed. I heard her words, but I couldn't figure out what 'fault' was, or why it mattered. I only knew this: having me around was not what my Dad had in mind. I tried to imagine that he was alive in some kind of way—that there was some connection between us—but all I could remember about him was his shoes.

I was with The Turk now—a man to be with once every week at game time, and twice more at practice. To her credit, Mom made it to every outing and sat in the bleachers, doing the very best she could. Still, her best couldn't help me with baseball. In Prosperville, I needed a man for that. Mom's hair was a wreck most days, and she was too tired from working her jobs and too overwhelmed with her

own thoughts to do anything except sit. She would stare out at the lights as she ate her popcorn, her mind somewhere far beyond the game. We'd go home and she would sit alone in the dark. I could see the ember of her cigarette moving slowly up to her mouth and back down to her ashtray—up and back as the ice of her drink clinked softly against glass. She certainly had no energy to challenge anyone or anything, especially someone as big as our coach. It was just the way things were, she said. “Just the way men are,” she said. So with that, I was officially on my own down here in the dugout next to the Turk. I had to find a way to deal with it. Everyone finds a way to deal with it. And my way of dealing with it was to become quiet little Charlie, the reserve right fielder.

QUIET CHARLIE was a doe-eyed boy, a nice boy who wanted to please everybody if he could only find a way. I was well liked by my grade school teachers. I helped my mother after dinner. I sat still in class with both feet on the floor with the very top button of a check-plaid shirt buttoned up high. The curves of my cursive exactly touched the top, bottom, and dotted midline of my wide-ruled tablet paper. I was lousy at baseball even though I tried to do everything just as I was told—really tried to get a ball to stay in my glove or make just one throw that didn't end up in the dirt at the catcher's feet. I was a kid who hadn't given up the game, even though I was watching it through the chain link and smoothing dirt with my sneakers.

I had a problem with baseball that I couldn't solve, and I needed some help. You see, every time a fly was hit in my direction I'd flush up with excitement and involuntarily run forward to meet the ball. And every time, I would be stopped in full stride by the sight of that ball cruising high overhead, only to land just a couple of feet from the exact spot where I'd just been standing. My leaping, open-mouthed attempt at a catch served only to make me look more spastic before running to dig the ball out of the grass next to the outfield fence as the batter rounded the bases. The outfield boundary

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was a faded red snow fence made of wooden slats, put there because the town didn't have money for anything else. Soft rye grass grew into long, slender seed-heads beside the fence.

It was all quite natural. And the thing about this, the really pathetic thing, the thing that made me a true right fielder—was that I'd come to believe nothing about my situation was wrong. Everyone but me knew our team just sucked, that Turk was an inbred and instinctual loser, and that my position as Structo's second-string right fielder was the sorriest spot on the worst team in the league. Right field was where they sent the kid with no arm; the kid with no glove. And I was even a step down from right field. The second-string right fielder was the bottom of the bottom. He was the kid who rode the pine for the first two-thirds of the game, to be sent out reluctantly in the seventh for the two and a half innings he must be allowed to play under paragraph 14(a) of the Summer Rec. League Full Participation Guidelines. His teammates then could only pray that a ball would never come his way.

I WAS A RIGHT FIELDER because it was natural for me to be there on the bench, out of the action, in a uniform three sizes too big with the peeling iron-on letters of the Structo Fabricating name on my back. It was natural for the town to have no money for baseball, and a field that hadn't been improved in two decades. It was natural for the place to produce a coach like The Turk as an example to children; natural to demonstrate and entrain bad habits at every opportunity; natural for the town to just go along, dying a day at a time. I didn't know any different. And why should *I* try to change anything? "It's just the way things are meant to be," I heard. That's what I said too, and I believed it.

There's a perspective that one develops from this position, especially when you don't worry about it: everything is fine if you don't let yourself believe anything's wrong. I played last-string right field for Structo as a sleepwalker; happy just to watch the fascinating spirals of Turk's second-hand smoke waft through the dugout, happy

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to give a little pepper and yell out “hey batta-batta” from a seat on the bench, and to smooth the dirt with my sneakers until I was sent out to play for two and a half innings in right field—there to watch the balls go over my head, then run to dig them out of the lush green rye grass that grew, untrimmed, against the faded red snow fence that marked the boundary of my Little League world.

BUT SOME DAYS were different. Sometimes in the middle of a game an uncomfortable thought would come to me in the clearest way. *It shouldn't be like this Charlie*, the thought said. *There's something better that could happen here.* I was spending my summer sitting next to The Turk, letting his smoke pour across my face in absolute and passive acceptance, listening to his foul mouth, looking at his morbid body, and becoming more Turk-like a bit at a time by force of contact. *If I could only stand up for myself like he does*, I thought, *things might be different.* But I had no idea where such a power could come from. I was waiting there for something. I didn't even know what I was waiting for.

So there on the bench, I did the only thing I could do. With every slow, smooth curve of the toe of my Converse sneaker in the dirt, I was letting my mind go quiet, and in that quiet mind I was sending out a prayer. I was silently, secretly, praying for a miracle. And then, on the twenty-second day of June, at the bottom of the seventh inning, that miracle turned up.

2: SOMEONE WHO ANSWERS

There are no miracles; only messages from another place
on the path.

...*The Field Book.*

I'D JUST LET ANOTHER BALL FLY OVER MY HEAD during our fifth game, and was running in from right field to get my one chance at bat. A man was leaning up against the chain link fence that paralleled the right field line. His image flickered twice then became solid. I'd never seen anyone like him before. *Probably from out of town visiting relatives*, I thought. He had a jaw with no fat under it, and I could see the veins in his forearms. He wore a clean white T-shirt tucked into a trim waist, faded blue jeans, and a worn red ball cap.

"Hey kid."

He looked straight at me with his chin down and motioned to me with the fingers of his left hand. I felt powerless to resist him, and he looked so much like a real coach that I ran right over. But I didn't make it, at least not all the way.

About four feet from him I ran into something midstride.

I'd heard of alien force fields, like bubbles or invisible shields that space-beings put out around their mother ship to protect it from lasers, cosmic rays, and other space stuff. I was still young enough to believe that such things were possible. But this was different. I felt a

circle around this man that was both fierce and loving at the same time. It felt like a boundary—a boundary to another world.

The man picked his head up slightly, and for just a moment, a glitter of light flashed out from under the shadow of his cap. The light was coming from his eyes, his intense eyes that were blue as a robin's egg around the edges and fading to liquid blue-black in the centers. I'd seen color like this once before in the deep middle of a clear Midwestern summer's sky above my Grandpa's farm, just as the first star was coming out at twilight. There was a small black dot just above and between his eyes, like someone had marked him there.

"Would you like to come in?" he asked.

I didn't know what to say. He was waiting for me. There was a small leather-bound book in his right hand which he closed and transferred to his back pocket. I could just make out the title carved with a leather-working tool into the cover: *The Field Book*.

Maybe the book has something to do with baseball, I thought. After all, baseball is played in a field.

The hand that had been holding the book stretched out to me palm upward, but the man didn't reach across whatever was separating us. He was inviting me in, but I would have to take a step across the boundary to get to him. There was something about this man that required me to make a decision and take action. It was a single step, but without that step nothing was going to happen.

My right foot moved, and I felt all of the fierceness melt away. My ball glove fell from my left hand and came to rest on the ground. I was less than two feet from him. For just an instant, I felt as if I'd been sick all my life and suddenly been made well. I stood there before him.

He held me in his gaze, and then spoke.

"So let me ask you something," he said, smiling at me.

"What?"

"Are you tired of missing those fly balls every damn time?"

I'd never had an adult talk to me like this before. His eyes were on me, and I couldn't move. I heard myself start to talk.

"I *am* pretty tired of it to tell you the truth. It's no fun."

“You said it. So if I told you about something that would change things—would you actually do it?”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“I mean if I told you a secret about how to catch—something you could do that would let you catch any ball that came your way, any time, maybe even *every* time—would you do exactly what I tell you? Actually do it and not just talk about it, pretend you’ve done it, or make excuses?”

“I guess so.”

“I need to hear a ‘yes’.”

“OK. It’s ‘yes’, I guess,” not knowing what I was getting myself into.

“OK. And well ... would your answer be the same if I told you that this thing might really cost you?”

“Like how much?” I asked.

There was a gray toy safe on my shelf back at home nestled between a hard-bound version of *Daniel Boone Wilderness Scout* and a purple rock from Michigan. Inside were six black cat firecrackers that my mom didn’t know about, two five dollar bills, six ones, five quarters, five nickels, and a dime. I’d been saving those seventeen dollars and sixty cents for more than a year.

“Like giving up who you are,” he said. “That’s how much.”

That didn’t seem so bad. I was relieved that I was not going to lose my whole seventeen-sixty! Giving up ‘who I was’ didn’t seem like such a big deal to me. I was only nine years old. I *wanted* to be somebody else.

“You got a deal,” I heard myself say.

“I’ll consider that a promise.”

He motioned me closer, leaning forward to whisper. “My little brother, from here on out, *all* of the time, *no matter what...*” he said, leaning still closer, now right in my ear “Watch ... the ... ball ..., watch the ball, then *watch the ball some more*. Don’t you take your eyes off it, for *any* reason, *no matter what*. Do just this one thing, and let everything else take care of itself.”

He pulled upright.

“Ya got it?”

“I think so.”

“So when are you going to start?”

I just looked at him and shrugged. He smiled at my hesitation.

“Always off in the future isn’t it?”

He knelt back down and looked at the ground, rubbed his cheek, then turned and pulled on my elbow.

“Do you want to hear a secret? I’ll tell you one, no extra charge,” he whispered.

“What’s that?”

He sat back on his ankles, folding his hands in front of him.

“Listen. Whether it’s tonight or a hundred years from now, there’s only one place and one time that you can ever actually do anything, see anything, or realize anything. It’s the most important moment in life.”

“When’s that?”

His eyes softened and he smiled gently at me.

“I offer this moment. Right now. And what could shift *right now* that will create the next moment, and then the next, and the next, which is ...” he paused ... “now a moment that has just arrived.”

He stood up, reached forward, and put the first two fingers of his right hand gently against my forehead. I felt my mind shift outside of itself. For an instant I believed ... no ... I *knew* that I could watch that ball, no matter what. Of course I could do it. It was already done. Then he took his fingers away and the feeling left me. I just stood there, looking into his blue eyes.

“Ya got it?”

“Yes, I think so,” I said, not knowing what had just happened.

“So whatcha gonna do?”

“Watch the ball?”

“And when are you going to do it?”

“Right now?”

“Alright then!”

The man stepped back, and I was outside again. Some kind of boundary went up between us, but it was softer and not as fierce as before.

He doffed his hat with his left hand and pointed the cap toward the Structo dugout. He smiled and bowed to me with his right palm upraised. I picked up my glove, turned, and ran back to my teammates. The other squad had already taken the field, and I was holding up the game. I sat down and looked back to the first base fence where the man had been standing. He was gone.

I turned to Jimmy Rice, sitting next to me.

“Did you see that old guy there by the fence next to first?”

“I didn’t see anybody. I thought you were over there taking a pee.”

The dugout cracked up.

I looked back over to first again. Strange. I’d just been talking to a man, a real ball player, and made a promise to him. I was sure of it.

“Hey, did anybody see that guy I was just talking to?”

The only answer was the pandemonium of headlocks, wedgies, and goofballing that was our typical dugout deportment. No one had been paying any attention. But surely Mom would have been watching me, worried that I was talking with a stranger. I called her down from the stands and asked her if she’d seen him. Again no. Between innings she’d been buying one of her greasy sacks of Pops-Rite corn and had seen nothing. Scanning the bleachers, I saw no one but the grab-bag of parents and siblings who were always at our games. He was just gone, as if he’d never really been.

I sat down on the bench. *So how would anyone know what I’d promised, or whether I was doing what I’d said I’d do? Who’d care anyway?* I could just forget about it, and there would be no consequences as far as I could see. It seemed pretty stupid—worrying about some silly promise. The grey-haired man wasn’t even my real coach. My real coach was The Turk, sitting down at the end of the dugout flipping open his Zippo.

I watched Turk light up another one, then snap his lighter closed with a flick of his fat wrist. That man out of nowhere—the man with

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the sinewy arms and flashing eyes—what if *he* were our coach? Would we be on the bench laughing at farts, karate chopping each other, and not caring whether we won or lost? I had a feeling it would be a lot different. Everyone would either leave the team or start down a road that led to something—something like becoming real ball players. As it was, nothing would happen. Nothing. I could just coast along, finish the season, and that would be it.

I turned my eyes to the field and watched the ball as it made an elliptical arc around the pitcher's back and was released. The man had told me to watch baseballs as they flew around the field. I'd made a promise to do it. I glanced over at The Turk as he exhaled a blue cloud through his nostrils like an overweight dragon. He then picked a piece of tobacco off of his tongue. I turned my eyes back to the field as the ball dropped out of the catcher's mitt. And with that, I began my summer of watching.

3: CONCENTRATION PRACTICE

Once committed to the ‘yes’, all of the rest is just working out the details. Each step taken by itself is fairly simple and easy—it’s the hesitation and doubt that makes it difficult. It’s all quite easy if you are willing to drop yourself, your past, and your future, and simply do the next thing now.

...*The Field Book.*

THERE ON THE BENCH I didn’t have much else to do. Each game I’d come and watch the ball. I watched the ball as it left the hand of the pitcher, and followed its line into the catcher’s glove. I watched The Turk mindlessly rub a ball in his hands like he wanted to erase the lacings. I watched the foul grounders come toward the dugout, making little craters as they hopped, and watched the little rooster tail of dirt behind them as they rolled to a stop. It didn’t take more than a few innings to realize what a bit of heavy lifting I’d taken on. Despite my desire to create something more interesting, at bottom there was absolutely nothing more to watching the ball than watching a ball. Nothing.

Of course it’s not so hard to watch the ball *some* of the time. I could do that without much problem, then go back to drawing pictures in the dirt of the dugout floor. But to watch the ball *all of the*

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time, no matter what, like the man told me to do: *that* was a whole different thing.

To *never* take your eye off the ball was hard. It was boring. Just watching, and *only* watching the flight of *every* pitch and throwback. Exactly following the path of every hit and never looking at the runner—never going to the bathroom, or turning to talk. If I watched the ball properly, I couldn't do anything else. What's more, I was failing at this one simple thing.

As hard as I tried, I couldn't watch for more than three minutes at a stretch. I started to itch. A rogue bee buzzed my head. I had to pee. The sun was in my eyes. I started to use the word 'damn', just like the man on the sideline. I must have taken my eyes off the damn ball six hundred times.

Watching got so hard that the very fact that it *was* so hard began to make it interesting. *Some unseen force is trying to stop me from looking at the ball and keeping my promise*, I thought. I was sure of it. So I started to play a game that I made up. After I'd reached a point when I was sure I couldn't last another second, I'd count five more breaths and keep watching. Sometimes I would look away right after the fifth exhale. But at other times I would break through and be able to watch for many minutes more. My body could watch forever—the problem was in my mind. I was in a hardball staring contest with myself as both winner and loser. I watched from the dugout, and watched from right field when I got a chance to play. Then slowly, like a growing thing, something started to happen.

I started to see the ball.

Instead of a boring white thing being thrown and hit around, the ball became a pattern of color. When the ball was hit hard from underneath, the red stitching spun backwards, turning the ball the slightest shade of pink in flight. The thrown ball was a tight red spiral changing depth and size in the air as the ball came in or away. I saw for the first time that the ball moved through different arcs even before it left the thrower's hand. From the travel of those arcs, I could begin to tell *before* the ball was released whether the throw would be high, low, or off to the side.

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During warm-ups, I stopped thinking about catching the ball and let myself watch the stitches rotate toward me. If I concentrated, I could watch those stitches all the way into my glove. There would be a ball just sitting there in the pocket, caught. Yes. Caught.

I began catching more of what was thrown at me, even the hard grounders bouncing right in front. Hard grounders had terrified me since the time in practice when a hard-hit ball bounced wild into my face just below my left eye. Jimmie Roberts had been hit in the nuts by a hard one-hopper while playing shortstop in our first game. He lay there in the dirt, trying not to put his hands down there in front of everybody. After the inning, he sat on the bench next to me throwing up with his white face down between his knees.

Since spring, Jason Lott, our big second baseman, had thrown balls right at my feet just to see me close my eyes and jump away. But now Jason's mean throw was a reddish-white comet a foot and a half long, making a fascinating impact crater right in front of me. If I put my face *forward* to watch it better, right into the danger zone, my glove automatically came up at the perfect instant to grab the ball. If I could see the ball, I was protected by reflexes I didn't know I had! I fielded four in a row that Jase threw at me, catching three, and knocking the other one down in front of me. He then gave up on the one-hop game and started throwing bullets as hard as he could. I caught those too, except the wild one he tossed twelve feet over my head.

During a game against the Kiwanis squad, I fielded a line drive cleanly on the first hop, and got the ball almost back to second. The next game, a fly ball was hit hard to me. My legs jumped at the crack of the bat. I saw it coming out with a little under-spin on it. *I can see it. It's getting bigger. But ...* Damn. I was running up again. I made my highest and most spastic leap yet, but watched the ball sail three inches over the top of my glove. It ended up in the seed-heads by the fence like all of the rest. An easy out turned into a stand-up triple. Turk said nothing to me when I came in, but it was clear that for the rest of the season I was getting nothing more than my allotted

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innings in the outfield, and one at-bat per game. I didn't care. Sitting on the bench gave me more time to watch the ball.

AUGUST SEVENTEENTH ARRIVED, and with it the last game of the regular season. We hadn't won a single game all summer, so there was no chance that we'd be involved in the playoffs over the Labor Day weekend. Four of our thirteen players were gone, three on vacation, with Ricky Edwards out due to injury from a treble hook he'd put into the palm of his hand while fishing up in Wisconsin. With only nine players, The Turk *had* to put me in. And not just for two and a half innings. The whole game. I stood out in right field with my knees flexed as we played Symco Battery, giving a little pepper, yelling "hey batta-batta," ready to field. I watched the ball and waited. There was no action in right field all game.

Yet at the start of the final inning, our depleted Structo squad found itself in a most unusual position. We were ahead with a one-run lead. I'm proud to say that the score was made by yours truly. At the top of the third I'd come to bat with no one on base, and watched the spirals of a slow curve ball come right into the sweet spot of my twenty-eight inch Louisville Slugger. No vibration. Just a cracking sound so sweet and satisfying and beautiful—the ball springing away and sailing just left and over the second baseman's head for a clean single. Even The Turk waddled up off the empty bench and clapped with the two fingers that weren't holding his Camel. After a walk, a dying quail hit to right, and an overthrow, I arrived. A little leap left the dusty impression of my sneaker right in the center of home plate, a place no sneaker of mine had ever been before.

IN THE BOTTOM of the ninth—the final inning of the season—I was still in right field defending our one-run lead. The inning went pretty well for us, with the first two batters going down one-two. But now, at the final out, the string unraveled for our pitcher Teddy "Mac" McElvay. He hit the wall at what must have been his hundred

and twenty-eighth pitch, and his arm turned to rubber. He bounced a few weak pitches in front of the plate, and then threw a couple at the umpire's head. Two batters in a row took a walk. Turk was too much of an idiot to bring Jason in from second base to throw his bullets and give Mac the break he deserved. Yet wild Jase could have been his own disaster. He could easily have hit three batters in a row, or thrown it over the backstop to lose the game for us in the end.

And so with two on and two out, Bobby Roberts came to bat. Bobby was a good kid. He lived a couple of blocks north of our house, and came down on winter weekends to play Legos with me in the basement. A quiet kid. Big. A ten year old going on fifteen, already weighing about one-fifty, with peach fuzz and a need for deodorant. He didn't mind hanging out with me. He was above the crowd. The best cleanup batter in the league. He could do whatever he wanted.

I knew what was going to happen before Mac released the first pitch. I watched the arc of the ball traveling in his hand as it came around behind him to be released high as Mac fell forward, trying to force it over the plate. A weak, fat fastball with no spin at all high up in the strike zone. It would've been a changeup had Mac established a real fastball first, but that hadn't happened. Bobby started to swing but then hitched back, waiting for it to come. A late swing would launch it toward the weak spot in the defense and the closest outfield fence. That was right field, and me.

I was moving before the sound reached me. I could see Bobby's open stance and the ball hanging on the fat of the bat, like it was being slung forward instead of hit. It cleared the infield, rising hot, a three-foot streak picked up by the weak lights of the Rec. League field. A little over-spin as it turned in the air over to my right, getting bigger. I could pick out the slow rotation of a red string that had been jarred loose. There was nothing in my mind but quiet.

I barely felt the old snow fence as I hit it, going clean through the faded slats, stumbling just a little but not enough to break my watch on the ball. I saw it fall, now big as a grapefruit, and heard the soft sizzling sound of a ball slicing the air not five feet away. Left foot

down ... one full stride ... then the glove reaching—a four-inch leather pocket traveling gently through space at a dead run five feet off the ground towards a meeting place: the only place in the universe, at the only instant in time, where the small pocket and the falling ball could ever come together. I slowed down and looked at the ball nestled in my glove, realizing for the first time that a baseball had beautiful, tiny, cell-like patterns on its leather surface.

THE SILENCE was broken by a full, happy sound from the infield rising toward me on the night air. I could hear Mom cheering, and the boom and bellow of The Turk, our coach and mentor, his fat, powerful fingers wrapped into chain link; ramming and rattling the dugout fence like a gorilla in a cage. “Fuckin-A! Fuckin-A, did you see that? Fuckin-A!”

I was too much aglow, in love with everything, with the deep evening wrapped around me and the game ball in my glove, to care much when the plate umpire ruled the hit a home run. His contention was that the ball had cleared the park, and could not have been reached by me but for a construction defect in the playing field.

Had an archangel appeared bodily with a flaming sword, Structo could have found no better advocate and defender than now materialized in the unlikely body of The Turk. All that he was, all that he had, and all that he might become was committed at that moment to me and to the cause of preserving Structo Fabricating’s only win of the season. He’d finally found something honorable to fight for.

The fracas found its epicenter in front of home plate, pulling everyone out of the stands. I could not have cared less. The win didn’t matter. Bobby and I smiled across the diamond at each other. We both knew just how well he’d hit that ball—and that just this once, this one time in my life, I’d caught it better. That was enough. I slipped away with the ball in my glove and jumped over the third base fence to be alone and look up at the stars.

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I WAS LEAPING a little—running easily—the great moment already being re-remembered and magnified when a shadow moved in front of me out of the deeper shadow of a blue spruce that stood in the lawn next to the diamond. I tried to pull up, but ran right into a hard belly with my forehead. It was him.

We were beyond the arc of the Rec. League lights, but his eyes were alive as if lit from inside.

I stood there with my heart racing, feeling a strange kind of fear with joy all mixed into it. Something was about to happen.

He smiled at me. “It seems that you’ve done well, my little brother—a good bit better than some of the others who at first seemed to have greater potential. I knew you had a chance when I saw the light around you there in right field.”

“You saw a light around me?”

“I did indeed.”

I just stood there, not knowing what to say, and wondering who the “others” might be.

He pointed toward the field. “Just look at all of those folks arguing about a silly game, and not one of them even remotely curious about the only thing here of real interest.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“How you came to catch that ball, of course!”

I turned my head for an instant to watch The Turk flail his arms like a giant and flightless blue bird in the infield.

I turned my head back, and the man was forty feet away, with one hand slung casually over his head and the other in his pocket. I’d been looking away for no more than four or five seconds. Nobody could cover that distance that fast without making a sound.

“How did you do that?” I demanded.

“Why don’t you pitch me the ball,” he said.

I took the game ball out of my glove and threw it to him. Even though it was nearly dark, he caught it deftly with one hand and slung it back to me. I watched it glimmer into my glove, and he motioned for me to throw it again. We started to play catch. Each time he would throw it a little harder, and I would throw back just as hard.

“I came back to ask you something,” he said, taking a short wind up.

“What’s that?” I asked, huffing from effort.

“I was wondering if someday you might be interested in doing some real training, something a bit more intense and interesting than just watching baseballs.”

“You mean like becoming a pro player?” I asked, getting excited.

He chuckled. “Your future does not lie in baseball, my little brother. One catch hardly qualifies you for the big leagues, and your real talents lie elsewhere. I had something a bit different in mind.”

“Like what?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Well why not?” I asked indignantly.

“It’s because I have to *show* you, or rather set up the conditions where you might be shown. I can offer no guarantees. It’s not up to me in the end. But I *can* say that some powerful men and women—people who could have anything on this earth—have considered the chance that I am offering to be the one thing, the only thing, of any real value in this world.”

He snagged another ball effortlessly with his open hand. I was throwing really hard now.

“So what did it feel like to catch that ball—how’d it happen?” he asked.

“I don’t know. It just happened. I opened my glove and there it was.”

“Yes, of course. You have that now. Like the first little trickle of water beginning to mark a channel in the desert, something that might become as vast and beautiful as the Grand Canyon in the end. A good start, but only that.”

Something about that comment made me throw the ball as hard as I could right at the man’s head. He stepped to the side and caught it like it was a feather. He walked up to me, signaling that our game was over.

“So Charlie, I’ve got to go now.”

“How is it that you know my name?”

“I know a lot about you Charlie. More right now than you know about yourself.”

“Who are you anyway? I don’t even know who you are!”

“Well hmmm ...” He sat there for a minute with his head cocked, scratching the back of his head. “Who *I* am ... will be determined entirely by who *you* are, Charlie. Whether I like it or not, your mind will turn me into whoever you need me to be. I’m here to serve you, and that’s it. I’ll become the person you need; the person that gives you permission to take the next step. I’m here to help you remember what your soul has already decided.”

“You mean something like taking the training?”

“Well, that would be a big next step, if you want to take it on. It’s really up to you. The choice is always up to you.”

“I still don’t know who you are! And what’s this training going to be like anyway?”

He looked at me quizzically. “Well ... I think for you, kid, it might very well be a wilderness training—the wild is a place that holds great concentrations of power. It’s a good place for friends like us. Yes, I think so ... definitely,” he said, as if settling something in his mind that he’d been debating. “The deep wilderness for you Charlie. A journey across water. *She’d* like that. I’ll lead you out into the wilderness someday Charlie, if you want to come. Up north, I think. You can meet her there.”

“So what are you saying ... are you going to be like Moses leading me into the wilderness?” I asked, remembering a lesson from last week’s Sunday school.

“Not bad. That’s closer to being right than you might think,” he said. “Very good. You’ve decided who I need to be for you.”

“But I don’t even know your name!”

“We’ll since you’ve come up with it, you can call me ‘Moses’ if it suits you.” he said laughing. “Yes, ‘Moses’ it is. That’s alright isn’t it?”

I hardly knew what to say. And who was *she* anyway?

“So I’ll call for you when the time is right—when you’re ready for the next step—OK?”

“When will that be?”

“This sort of thing doesn’t happen on a schedule Charlie. It will be just the right time, when you’ve developed enough. An inconvenient time. Some time when you have something to do with your life that seems much better, and therefore the opportunity to make a choice.”

“How will I know it’s you?”

Moses laughed, rolling his eyes and waving the baseball in the air.

“Perhaps the gentleman will require a written invitation ...” he said mockingly, making an exaggerated bow. “Yes of course, an invitation! Look for it—a formal invitation in the mail—it’s already coming to you!”

He stepped back, and fired the ball into the evening air with a powerful snap of his arm. The ball went up like it was leaving the planet. In a matter of seconds it became less than a pinpoint in the night sky, tiny but illuminated, like it had joined the stars. The ball hung in the air, floating around. Then it started to grow bigger. It was coming down, right toward me, faster than any ball ever thrown.

The voice of Moses was already faint, shouting at me from a quarter of a mile away. “Watch the ball ... watch the ball Charlie! Right here! Right now!”

I stood underneath the rocketing ball, wobbling with my mitt up, not knowing whether to attempt a catch, or turn and run like hell. I had the oddest feeling that running wouldn’t help—that the ball would follow me wherever I ran. It was coming, coming down, and there was not a damn thing I could do about it.

4: THE INVITATION

In every one of us there's a voice that tells us we are destined for some great thing. It can begin with just a whisper, an impulse to evolve. A journey into the fullest possibilities of being human might begin this way.

...*The Field Book.*

*S*pringtime in Chicago, sixteen years later.

THE SLOT in the door of my refurbished Chicago brownstone needed oiling, and screeched open as the mailman struggled to jam a fat bundle through it. Today's delivery landed with a thud on the new forest-green flooring created to mimic real Italian marble. A half-dozen glossy home décor catalogues scattered on the floor, along with a couple of bills and invitations from credit card companies. A rectangular package separated itself from the rest of the mail and skidded across the floor to rest against the buffed edge of my loafer. It looked out of place without a label or tape, wrapped in brown paper and tied with twine the old fashioned way.

"Anything interesting in the mail?" she asked as she leaned forward into the mirror, her eye almost touching the glass as she extended her eyelashes with a small mascara wand.

“Not really” I replied, picking up the brown parcel. “Just some catalogues and stuff.”

“You wouldn’t mind if I grabbed a couple of your *Architectural Digests* to flip through on my way to the airport, would you?” she asked. “I’m planning to get my own place next year, and just can’t wait to start decorating.”

“No problem.”

The parcel was heavy for its size; solid. I turned it over. The right hand corner was covered with Canadian stamps. The name ‘Charlie Smithson’ was written in a small, careful hand. There was no return address—just two carefully drawn circles overlapping one another, with the constellation Ursa Major, the great bear, drawn within and pointing to Polaris, the northern star. My fingertips tingled as my hand moved across the parcel. *Could this be from him?*

The woman put down the mascara and pulled out a glossy lipstick, which she began to apply to her open lips in a series of slow accurate strokes. I watched her through the open door of my bedroom, forgetting for a moment what I held in my hand. My head was pounding from too many Mojitos last night, and I was having the hardest time remembering her name. She was one of the first-year law students from out of town for a round of interviews at the firm—I was pretty sure about that. Right now she was leaning into the mirror dressed in black heels with no stockings and a strapless black ‘Miracle Bra’ that pushed her breasts up high and together. *You shouldn’t have done this—especially on a Wednesday night, Charlie, I thought. You were supposed to be interviewing her.*

I pulled lightly on one of the strings of the parcel, then stopped for fear of what the package might contain. *It’s been nearly sixteen years.* I couldn’t remember the features of his face, although I could still remember the energy around him: it’s fierceness on the outside and gentleness once inside his field.

“You said that you could take me to the airport this morning,” she said.

I looked down at my watch. It read 9:15. My disciplined personal schedule required that I be in the library at 10:00 sharp—no later.

Finals were over, and everyone else was just relaxing for a week in preparation for graduation. But Professor Wills had asked me for my analysis of a new Supreme Court precedent, and I was planning to do that today. I spent almost every free day in the library, whether I had an assignment due or not.

“Just where are you from again?” I asked.

She snapped the lipstick wand into its holder, and rolled her eyes to look at me in the mirror with a single upraised brow.

“I’m from New York, Charlie, which you’ve obviously forgotten, and in case you’re worried, I’m not going to take the job you offered me when you were drunk last night. I had a better offer in San Francisco before I even got here. I’m just out here for dinner, cocktails, and sex courtesy of the Thompson Group, it seems,” she said, rolling her wrist upward toward the ceiling. “You don’t even remember my name, do you?”

I looked down at the floor.

“You don’t mind if I call you a cab? I forgot that I had an appointment this morning. I’d be happy to pay for your trip to the airport.”

“No problem,” she said, turning to the bedroom to gather up the rest of her things. “Someday when you’re President, I can say that I screwed you then decided to take a better offer. And by the way, my name is Heather.”

Maybe I could be President, I thought, rolling the idea around in my mind as I dialed up the cab. After all, I was number one at Northwestern Law School and would be reporting to work at the Thompson Group in less than a month. *That’s a pretty good place to start*, I thought.

“It’ll be here in five minutes,” I said, putting down the receiver.

Thompson had promised a window office on the sixty-fourth floor of the Hancock Tower with a beautiful view of the lake, a six-figure starting salary, and a personal secretary. I’d just signed an impossibly expensive rental agreement on this North Shore townhome based on my anticipated earning power, and the maître d’

at the Signature Room on the 95th floor of the Hancock already knew my name. *Why couldn't I be President?*

Heather shimmied into a little black dress, sleeveless with padded shoulders, and finished her ritual with the placement of some long dangly earrings. She would cross and uncross her shaved legs dozens of times today inside that form-fitting black tube, each re-arrangement an opportunity to enjoy the subtle shift in energy that her legs in those heels could produce in any room.

“Can you zip me?”

“Sure.”

She turned her back to me, pulling her hair to the side. I flipped the parcel onto the couch and reached down to touch the zipper at the base of her spine.

You've done this too many times before, Charlie. You know how empty you always feel when they walk out the door.

I zipped Heather into her dress. She extended her chin to offer me her cheek. She had insufficient reason to kiss me directly and risk messing up her lips this early in the morning.

“Bye then,” she said, picking up her bag and walking toward the door.

She turned once to look over her shoulder, offering me her neck for just an instant.

“See you in the White House.”

“See you then,” I replied.

I heard Heather's heels mince down the front steps of the brownstone, the door of the taxi closing behind her, and the sound of the car pulling away. I stood for a long time, listening. Now there was only the sound of the morning traffic on the street outside, broken by muffled snippets of conversation from the sidewalk.

I looked around for a moment at the confines of my luxury residence. I'd chosen this home in part because of its hardwood floors and tile that could be spotlessly maintained to a high gloss. My sparse modernist furniture was hard, with clean aesthetic lines. A dozen well-sharpened yellow number two pencils were in their round holder next to the phone, tips up. A small collection of loafers and

Johnston and Murphy wing tips were in my closet, with a cedar shoe tree in each shoe to maintain the original shape. I had three high quality suits in the closet along with about nine other outfits, each on a plastic hanger spaced evenly apart. I felt that this was the best way to do things; and I expected nothing but the best from both myself and from others around me.

I reached down and picked up the parcel. It was the first thing not mass-processed that had come through my mail slot since I'd moved in. I weighed the parcel in my hand.

I have Moses to thank for all of this, I thought. Without him, none of this would have happened.

IT ALL STARTED a few weeks after my big catch, when school began, and I showed up for the first day of class in fifth grade. When Mrs. McIntosh passed out the first assignments, I looked down at my papers. I looked at those papers for a long time and concentrated. I looked deeper at the combination of letters, and felt a cone of silence come down and wrap around me. I was safe inside the cone.

Then, as if it was happening by its own accord, the edges of the papers began to glow with the slightest yellow and blue color. And just like that, I could see almost all of the answers written there on the page before I even put a pencil down to write them.

It all was so simple: up in front of the class Mrs. McIntosh was using the greenboard and her chalk to throw a ball to me. She was pitching slow and easy. I could see that it was all a game. Each classroom day was a small window through which information was coming. The teacher would open a window and hand information through it. I would catch the information, polish it, and hand the information back through my own little clear window—my homework papers and the weekly test. It was easy. I really didn't have to think all that much. I could just focus my attention, feel the cone come down, and enter into a quiet, ordered world where the straightness of my lines, the neatness of my paper, and the rightness of my answer mattered to someone.

OVER THE YEARS, many windows passed between me and the teachers. I didn't know where it was all going, but I just went with the flow. Despite much talk about challenge and independent thinking for 'gifted' students like me, what most teachers in Prosperville wanted was to hear their own words repeated back to them as truth. They never got tired of it. Adopting the teacher's perspective meant that I was smart; it meant I was good.

I began to receive papers back that had the number 100 written in red on the upper left corner. Next to that number were comments like "Good job!" and little smiley faces. Report cards came back to Mom with glowing columns of 'A's'. Gradually it began to mount up: hundreds of polished windows, thousands. Each window building on the next; each slightly more complex. It was a game of pitch and catch that required concentration, focus, and a willingness to repeat just what I'd been told.

In the beginning of this new game, I thought about Moses a lot, and thanked him every day for my new powers. He'd done something when he'd touched me on the forehead—some part of him had passed into me that caused good things to happen. But gradually, I came to think about him less and less. After all, it was *me* doing all the work. I was the one who was gifted. Sometime around junior year in high school, I stopped thinking about him altogether. About that same time, I'd come to believe that all my talents were self-created.

I became 'the smartest kid in Prosperville'. At least that's what the man at the Rotary Club said when he presented me with a five-hundred dollar scholarship my senior year. A full ride to Illinois State University came next.

At State, it was four years of 'A's', except for that creative writing class with the long-haired teacher. He sat there with his feet up on the desk, asking us to get in touch with our "muse" and create something original that had "emotional depth and complexity". I was lost. In a panic, I went outside the class and found a book entitled *The Elements of Mystery Writing*. There was a formula to follow, and I

turned in a mystery story of one hundred and twenty-eight pages. The story was “trite”, “formulaic”, and “clichéd” according to the long-hair. But my story was also complete, neat, turned in on time, and not plagiarized. I got a ‘B+’—the only one in my college career. I still graduated summa cum laude.

I received another scholarship to Northwestern Law School in Chicago. Nothing there was that much different, except at Northwestern, all the seats were filled with other smart kids like me. It turned out that “thinking like a lawyer” was a lot like “thinking like the instructor”. The windows had to be even clearer, with information returned back exactly as spoken from above, in exactly the same verbal sequence. It took longer to learn everything, and I devoted every moment—sixteen, seventeen hours a day—to the lines of words passing through the windows. It became my whole life. But I was good at it. Better, in fact, than everyone.

I broke things down into their easy parts, and mastered them one by one. The throw might look complicated, but if I broke it down into pieces—a bunch of easy throws—I could handle just about anything. The “complicated fact patterns” on the exams were nothing but facts from five or six cases put together in a single scenario. My answer was five or six polished windows passed back to the instructor; just what she had said when those cases were being discussed in class. I should know what was said; I could just close my eyes, let the cone come down, and then open my eyes. The first few words of the lecture were already there on my paper. All I had to do was point my pen and follow the lines. And now, the rewards were really starting to arrive.

I PULLED THE STRING on the parcel, but it would not come loose. I flipped it over and examined the binding. The string was tied in the back with a perfect square knot, and the loose ends were not loose but neatly lashed with smaller string and secured by knots that I recognized from my Boy Scout days as clove hitches. Someone had tied the package like they were securing it against a high wind. I took

a butcher knife out of the drawer, cut the string away, and unwrapped the heavy paper.

Inside was a clear waterproof map-case—a clear folder of heavy plastic that was rolled closed and sealed with a Velcro strip—the kind of carryall that whitewater river guides use to keep valuable things dry. I opened the case and began to remove the contents. The first thing out was a ragged and water-spotted map. The map was deeply creased, and worn so thin in places that there was nothing but holes where some information once had been. I gingerly held it up. In the topmost margin there was a hand-made drawing of the constellation Ursa Major, known by most everyone as the Big Dipper. The Dipper was pouring its contents toward another smaller star next to which was the careful notation: “Polaris, the North Star, Constant Friend and Guide.”

This was a topographical map of a vast wilderness area without roads, bridges, towns, or buildings. A maze of blue and brown lines representing streams and hills snaked around spills of blue that ranged from the size of a freckle up to an area as big as my hand. These were lakes. In places, comments were written in ink: “Good trout”, “night wind campsite”, “not this way”. The largest comment, marked in thick black ink with a different pen, was an arrow drawn to a thin lake shaped like a ribbon, with one large word: “Here”. There was no road leading to the place, only a dotted black line indicating a gravel road—Highway 67—which ended abruptly about ten miles from the ribbon-shaped lake. I would have to walk overland and paddle across several other lakes to get where the map was directing me to go.

I put the map on the coffee table and again reached into the pouch. My hand came to rest on a compass, a water-filled navigation tool with a scratched surface. It was in about the same condition as the map; they obviously had been used together over an extended period. I held the device in the palm of my hand, and watched the red end of the needle slowly come around and settle in one direction: north. *This map and compass are navigation tools for a guide*, I thought. This outfit had been used and re-used by someone who'd actually been to

the places on the map and made careful hand-written notations for the benefit of the next user. This was not a second-hand map; it was first-hand knowledge. I instantly sensed that I could bet my life on the cryptic statements scratched onto its surface. They could be relied on as fact.

There was more. I shook the pouch, and out fell the final object. It was a small book with a worn, soft, leather cover, slick and smudged in places from hands that had held it in the out-of-doors. It was a book of thick rag pages filled with words and images. Three faded words were tooled into the leather cover.

I fanned the soft pages. The book smelled of the thin soil of the forest floor, of sweat and spring air. A pressed white flower in the form of a star within a star fell out of the book onto the tile. The book was filled with other pressings and objects: aspen leaves with twirling stems, a small sprig of white pine still seasoned and resinous, flattened leaves of wild spearmint. The pressings had been waiting inside the book; waiting to release their breath. Their fragrance now rose from the pages. I closed my eyes and imagined a place where one could smell the pine and spearmint just by walking over the ground—where the footpaths released the scent as they warmed at midday. A feather from a great owl, with its quiet edges, drifted out of the book and onto the floor between my feet.

I gathered the fragile pressings, and set them gently on the end-table next to me. I held the book in both hands, feeling the softness of the cover. I opened the book to the first page.

Inserted there was a piece of birch bark, upon which was drawn an overly-elaborate crest—a knight's helmet with feathers coming out of the top and vines trailing down to form a border around the page. In the center of the page were written these words in calligraphic script:

KEEPERS OF THE FIELD

— *A FORMAL INVITATION* —

TO AWAKENING
TO ADVENTURE
TO THE END OF HIS WAY OF LIFE

ISSUED PERSONALLY TO:

CHARLIE **S**MITHSON

FROM THE COMMITTEE

-&-

MOSSES, **S**ERVANT AND **M**ESSENGER

At the bottom of the bark-paper, in less formal writing, were these words:

“GEAR UP FOR A WILDERNESS CANOE TRIP. WE’RE GOING DEEP, IF YOU’RE UP FOR IT. BRING ONLY WHAT IS ESSENTIAL. YOU ARE THE FIRST ESSENTIAL. ALL ELSE IS SECONDARY. COME NOW.”

IT WAS HIM. My body began to remember the moment those years ago when I’d caught the ball. The sense of being outside of time, the total quiet, the magical result, and the peace that followed; not caring if we won or lost—the simple joy of focus on the ball, and afterwards the voice of the man in the ball cap, stepping out from the shadow of the spruce tree: “Perhaps the gentleman will require a written invitation ... yes of course, an invitation! Look for it—a formal invitation in the mail—it’s already coming to you!” Yes. “It will be just the right time,” he’d said; an inconvenient time.

I stood in the brownstone in stunned silence. The invitation had at last arrived.

* * *

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