

HARMON, AT THE GAME

ADRIAN ASTUR ALVAREZ

Harmon Andarin, of average height and soft, boyish looks, ran to catch up to his friends. They all moved in one direction with the crowds of people, close to each other, slowly walking but with a full view of an overcast sky unobstructed by buildings or trees. Everyone eager, intent on the upcoming contest. As the four of them strolled across the busy parking lot and approached the stadium clock tower, they could hear drums, booming and infectious; rhythms appealing to the primal inner fabric of men. Harmon didn't trust anything about the mindless enthusiasm of these crowds. It was just a game he'd seen on TV; men moved a ball from one side of a field to another. Yet, here were all these people, fools really, dressed up, looking angry, hot for the fight. The architecture before Harmon was massive. The way groups talked and laughed and sang was at a slightly higher pitch. It was all very exciting and Harmon was terrified.

He was never one for sports. In fact, he was never one for leaving the house, but Tommy insisted he join them and Harmon needed to ask his friend for a job, so he had come along. He had never gone to an actual game, and there was also a sense that his life was in constant danger of intractable solitude and unhappiness. These friends were all

old friends. Harmon hadn't made any new ones in the past five years.

The crowds surged toward the front gate. Heckling had already begun. Ahead of Harmon, two fans of the opposing team were dressed in Cowboys hats and silver and blue jerseys. From somewhere, a bottle cap hit one of the men on the cheek.

Harmon's heart beat faster at what he'd just done. Had he broken the rules? Would the crowd punish him for it?

"C o w b o y s suck!" someone yelled. The men's necks tensed. I m p u l s i v e l y, Harmon reached out a hand, and tapped one of the

men on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry that happened," Harmon said. How could they so easily assault this man? It was barbaric.

"It's just a game," the man said without making eye contact. "Always two teams playing."

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"Harmon!" He jumped, but it was only Tommy. His friends were staring at him, waiting.

“Take your ticket, bro. Snap out of it,” Tommy said.

“Sorry,” Harmon muttered. Single file, they shuffled through a carousel of iron bars. When Harmon reached the front, a small, older Filipino woman waved an electronic arm over his body.

“Okay, keys?” she said.

“Thank you,” Harmon said. He advanced but she held him back with one arm.

“Sir, you have keys?” she said.

“Oh, yes. Sorry.” He dug out his keys and held them above his head while she waved the arm once more.

“Okay, have fun,” she said. The others stood waiting for him.

“Gotta hit the diesel, bros. Gotta do it,” said Tommy.

Tommy was his oldest friend of the three. They had met in college, back when the only thing Tommy cared about was football, getting help on his English essays, and drinking beer. In the years since then, he was the first of their circle to get married and start having kids. He had three now. These trips to football games, or disc golf, or paintball were his only chance to get out of the house. Tommy called it quality time but there was hardly any quality. More and more Harmon noted how Tommy acted like a caricature of the younger man he used to be. He rarely followed through with more than one beer, a lot of nostalgia, and an early exit to get back to Debbie before she got mad at him.

“Did you say ‘diesel,’ Tommy?” Garcia said. “Jesus, you’re such a bro. Why don’t you just suck on this?” He held out a plastic pilot’s flask from his pocket.

“Better not,” Tommy said. Garcia shrugged and passed the flask to Harmon. Drinking was not a major pastime for Harmon, but the hot burn of whiskey did a lot to steady his nerves. They stood directly in front of the small crew of drummers rocking out on the stadium steps. Harmon couldn’t

focus. The beat drew him away, picking up in his chest and gut.

“Let’s kick some ass!” Tommy yelled. He high-fived Garcia and Roger.

“Mama loves football games,” Garcia said, ogling a trio of muscular men as they walked by.

“You gotta tone down the gay, bro. I don’t want to have to kick anybody’s ass today,” said Tommy.

“I am what I am, baby. It’s all love here,” he said. “Don’t worry about me. I might just go home with one of these boys.”

“That’s why I like hanging out with you, Garcia,” said Roger. “You’re like a gay version of me. We go to a party and split the room. Hand that over, will ya?” He tipped the flask back for a long swig, then smiled at a full-figured woman just then walking past.

“I’m not like you at all, fool. I eat steak, not hamburger,” said Garcia.

As they marched up the cement steps to their seats at the top of the stadium, they spoke cheerfully until the halfway point, then began to huff, each privately bearing the burn of the remaining climb.

During the opening ceremony, military personnel brought out a flag and an officer sang the national anthem. More than any aspect so far, this part frightened Harmon. Why was the military here? Why was there a flag here? Was this game energy so powerful as to supplant national allegiance? Everyone stood with their hands placed dutifully over their hearts in solemn regard for love of country. When the song finished, three fighter jets roared over the stadium and an earthquake of cheers erupted. The sound was deafening. Harmon looked around. It was all too much. Too much. His hands trembled. He was going to cry. He needed a minute alone. He shuffled across their aisle intending to find a private place.

“Hey, you going down?” said Roger.

“Hold up, me too,” said Garcia. His friends handed him cash and orders for beer and fries. Though it would be a hassle, Harmon was glad

for the excuse to be alone without having to confess his anxiety. Once he found a bathroom, he closed himself into a stall and sat with his eyes closed and his hands clasped firmly over his ears. Coming here might have been a mistake. This was not his idea of a good time. The crowds were unpredictable. Noise prevented all thought. These people weren't only rooting for their team to play well, they were rooting against an "other," against a foreigner. Since he never fully felt he belonged to this culture, it meant they were potentially rooting against him. It was dangerous.

The lines at the concession booths were short. There was space here and this helped calm Harmon's nerves.

Oh, good. I won't give you the poisoned beer.

"Is this all for you?" said the girl behind the high counter.

"No, I'm getting things for my friends. I—do I need their IDs too?" The girl laughed. She wore a brown visor and just a touch of pink lipstick. When she laughed, her melody struck something within Harmon, and he noticed little lines of mirth form at the corners of her blue eyes.

"I was just kidding with you," she said.

"Oh, sorry. This is my first time at a game," he said.

"That's fun. Are you from here?" she said.

"Yes! This is my home. I'm not one of the others. I'm with the home team," he said, nervously glancing at the others around him.

"Oh, good. I won't give you the poisoned beer," she said. Harmon laughed a little too hard.

"You're only saying that because you haven't met my friends," he said. She laughed again and they exchanged cash and change.

"Well, have a great time today," she said.

"What's your name?" he said.

"I'm Mandy."

"That's a nice name. I'm Harmon," he said.

"See you around, Harmon," she smiled.

As he pushed each leg up the steep steps up to their seats, careful not to spill the tray full of beer, he thought of Mandy. She was cute. She said, "See you around, Harmon." Did that mean she wanted him to come back later? He wanted to see her around, too. He liked her. Maybe they could date. The crowd cheered. Everyone stood up and clapped. Maybe they could date and he could kiss her. He smiled. Many in the crowd cupped their hands over their mouths and yelled a constant "oh."

"You missed it, man! We ran it back for a touchdown at the last kick off," said Roger.

"Did you see it?" said Tommy.

"No, I was talking to a girl," Harmon said. As soon as he rid himself of the tray he noticed how wrinkled his sweatshirt and pants were. Maybe she hadn't seen them.

"Hey! You hear that, Garcia? Harmon was talking to a girl. A girl, buddy. Now pay up," said Roger.

"Doesn't prove anything, sweetheart," said Garcia.

Harmon sat down and looked out at the field. From here they could see an ocean of seats swaying and cresting with hats and heads right down to the team members standing at the sidelines.

"Did you get her number?" said Roger.

"No," said Harmon. He hadn't thought of that. He has to do that. Should he ask directly? Should he ask her out first or ask for her number first?

"You should do it, man! Get her number. Wait until the next quarter, though. We gotta finish these," said Roger.

What was it his father told him about asking out a girl? What was the advice? It was summer. They were staying at the cabin up at Silver Lake. They were on a canoe in the early morning. It was a remote lake in Northern California. He and his father had woken up early. His younger brother and mom were still asleep and it was dark outside. They needed flashlights to walk down to the deck and load their gear into the boat. Thick mist blanketed the lake's surface and muffled all sound. Harmon remembered how quietly the canoe sliced over the water. They were careful to barely touch the oars to the surface.

"Stand up, man! We're on D," said Tommy. Harmon stood up like everyone around them. They all yelled at the field. His friends had their hands cupped around their mouths so Harmon copied them and sounded out his own contributing "oh" to the multitude of voices. What happened next startled him. His voice, one round and open "oh," formed a tonal bond with some of the voices around him. It was as though his and theirs were a single, harmonious voice, which synced with an accumulation of others. Harmon realized he was in a kind of communion with these fans and they all spoke in the same unified effort. Then he was back to his own voice alone and Tommy knocked him with an elbow.

"Okay, man. The play's over. Just shout before they snap the ball." Garcia laughed and handed him the flask. The whiskey didn't burn as much that time. He took two sips and handed it back.

"How's business going?" he asked Tommy.

"It's alright. I gotta job next week. Overall, the economy is down so there isn't a ton of work to do, but I have a good reputation so I can get through the year."

"Could you hire me on one of your jobs?" said Harmon.

"Why? Don't you already have a job?"

"Yes, but I hate my job. I'm on the phone getting rejected all day."

"Yeah, but you're in sales. You don't know anything about painting."

"I could learn fast. How hard could it be?"

"Nah, man. I don't want to mix business and personal."

"Hey, Harmon, you should get that girl's number," said Roger.

"Oh, Jesus. Drop it, Roger," said Garcia.

"Yeah. I don't know how I could do it," Harmon said.

"Just go up to her and say, you know, you wanna get to know her better. Tell her you have a big dick," said Roger. They all laughed. Everyone stood up and formed an "oh." It was addictive. Harmon felt his entire body vibrate like a tuning fork and he melted into a vast alignment of belonging. He stopped hearing his own voice. When he looked around, it was as if his voice were Tommy's voice, or Garcia's voice, or the two guys' standing in front of him. He was all their voices and they were all his.

The water had been like a glass mirror, and faint, gray light refracted through the mist, illuminating everything around them. Harmon and his father heard the small plop of their hooks going into the water, nothing else. His father poured them some coffee out of his red Thermos and they sat like that, quietly, in the private fog of nature, fishing. That was the day his father told him about women. What was it? Harmon recited the memory, trying to hold onto the place that mattered. They whispered to each other after the first tug and crank of a catch.

"Nature, mornings like here are what make us men, Harmon," his father said. "Fishing like this: the smell, the silence, the way we drift. Don't forget this time here. It's raw manhood."

"What about girls?" Harmon whispered. What did he say?

The score was tied 7-7 and the home team had to stop the visitors from getting close enough to make a field goal. Harmon understood the stakes were high, so he fixed on the plays as best he could. Third down, and it was their last reasonable chance to pull ahead of the home team. The crowd

tightened in concentration and suspense. The other team hiked the ball and their quarterback dropped back for a long pass. Home team coverage was holding on and none of the players could get open. Then, one of the defensive linemen broke through and charged the relatively tiny quarterback. Harmon held one hand on Tommy's shoulder and jumped up and down, screaming, eyes wide. The lineman impacted the quarterback with such incredible force that the much smaller man landed several feet back. The football gently rolled away from his unmoving body.

A victorious exhalation swept across the stadium. Harmon shrieked with excitement. He turned to his friends and they gave each other high-fives as hard as they possibly could. His hand stung, but it felt great. The violence released the tension transferred from the field. Meanwhile, the quarterback still hadn't moved and the medics were on the field standing over him, slapping his hand. While they sat during the injury time-out, Harmon went to take another sip of beer but his cup was empty.

"Are you guys out of beer?" he asked.

"I'm still good," said Tommy.

"No, we're all out. Go get that girl's number, man," said Roger.

Harmon felt great. He bounced down the steps and filtered into a crowded area at the bottom of their tier of seating. "You suck, man!" a fan yelled at a heavysset man in a Cowboy jersey.

"Who has the better record?" the man retorted.

"Fuck you, man. We're gonna beat your ass."

"We'll see."

"Yeah, we will see. We'll see your loser ass go home to your fat wife after I banged her."

The lines were longer when Harmon got there. The game was close to half-time, so this was probably the busiest these lines would be all day. He found the one leading to Mandy and waited as the queue advanced.

After he asked his father about women, Harmon was sure his father told him something important that day. It'd been so many years since those summer trips. His memories from that time were fading or gone. After the mist lifted off the lake and morning blossomed into noon, the fish stopped biting and light ripples textured the water. The day's breeze swept over the surrounding mountains and glided across the water. They paddled back to their cabin, where his mom and brother stood at the edge of the shore waving as the canoe drew nearer.

Harmon waved to Mandy as he drew nearer to her in line. When it was finally his turn he rested his elbows on the counter and smiled.

"What can I get ya?" she said.

"It's great! It's really fun. The game, I mean," he said.

"That's great," she said.

He gave his order and lingered after she gave him change.

"Okay, you're all set," she said.

"Hey, can I get your number to know you better?" he said. She pursed her lips.

"I don't think so," she said.

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't know. I mean you're nice. You're cute."

"What can I get you guys?" she said to the two men standing behind him. Harmon's face got hot and he grabbed his tray of beers, sloshing them over his sweatshirt. Travel up the cement steps proved more difficult this time. He was out of breath. Several times, his sudden corrective moves spilled beer out of the cups and onto his clothes. By the time he got up to his friends some of the beers were only half full.

"What happened?" said Garcia.

"Drunk tax. Whatever, it's worth it," said Roger. "Did you talk to that girl?"

“No,” said Harmon.

The second half of the game didn't go well. The other team held back the home team, then came back with a touchdown. The home offense fell apart. During the fourth quarter, the other team scored a field goal and another touchdown. The home team was losing 7-24.

Harmon sulked with the others. He tried not to think about Mandy. He tried to think of what he had done wrong but it was hard to think at all. What was it his father told him? The memory stayed just beyond his grasp. Tommy wanted to leave early despite protests from Roger and Garcia, but when the other team scored yet another touchdown it was obvious there was no coming back to win this game. The game was lost. Everything was lost, Harmon thought. Memories of his father, Mandy, the job from Tommy, his life's balance.

On their way out, Harmon noticed a young man and his friend wearing Cowboys jerseys. They spit tobacco juice into empty beer bottles and cheered, “We rule! We rule! Y'all suck!”

Something inside of Harmon shifted.

“That's not cool,” muttered Garcia.

“Damn,” said Roger.

Harmon left his friends behind and swerved toward the two men. These low-class, audacious fools, he thought. These assholes coming into our stadium and yelling insults at us? Who do they think they're dealing with here? It was disrespect. It was wrong.

“We lost, sure. Shut up about it and go back to where you came from,” Harmon said.

The two laughed at him. One of them spit into his bottle. Harmon was two heads shorter than the smaller of the two.

“Can't help it if y'all suck so bad,” one of them said.

“We don't suck. You suck. Your hats look dumb, your attitude is arrogant, and you're spitting into our local beer,” Harmon yelled.

“Whoa, Harmon,” Tommy said.

Harmon threw his cup of beer at the two. The last thing he heard was Tommy exclaim, “Holy shit!” Then he hit the man closest to him in the chin with all his might. It was the only shot Harmon got. The second man punched him in the cheek. The beating seemed to last for hours. Harmon screamed into the air above the fray and dove at the men. No one could pull him away. Not Tommy, not Roger, not Garcia. Harmon swung many times, often at nothing. He was kicked and hit in the head and slapped in the mouth but he fought and pushed and struggled. Harmon fought for the first time in his life, and though there was no way he could win, it felt right and it felt good. ∞

Adrian Astur Alvarez writes fiction and poetry in Seattle, Washington. His work has appeared in *The Alembic* and *Diverse Voices Quarterly*. He is famous for his tweets, which can be read and followed @AdrianAlvarez. His website is also fun to keep up with: www.adrianasturalvarez.com