

Fiction Passage

***Fanhood* (Author Unknown)**

Sam Martinez *knew* baseball. He couldn't count the number of Los Angeles Dodgers games he had been to: his Uncle Gabriel had season tickets and had been taking Sam to games ever since he was three years old. When spring turned into baseball season, he got so excited that his parents practically had to bolt him to his desk after school so that he would do his homework before the night games. His little sisters knew that if they bothered him when he was either watching or listening to the game, they would get yelled at. Even Sam's friends tended to steer clear and tread softly when baseball season began.

Sam couldn't help it: he was obsessed. The smell of freshly cut grass, the feel of the hard and perfectly aerodynamic ball, the ping of the bat as it made contact, the crunch of peanut shells as you made your way down the aisles to the seats, the groans and shouts of the crowd—what could be better than all of this?

Sam had turned his bedroom into a Dodgers shrine, complete with pennants, framed newspaper articles, glass-encased fly balls, and a few autographed headshots. He didn't like other people to come into his room, though—sometimes he was worried it was a bit too much. He had once made the mistake of bringing a friend to a Dodgers game when Uncle Gabriel couldn't go, and it had been a disaster. Jordan had wanted to talk the entire time and barely paid attention to the game. He had then gotten annoyed at Sam for *not* wanting to talk: it was awful. Sam had felt too embarrassed to take notes and jot down the stats for the game, which had really messed up the seasonal scorecard he and Uncle Gabriel usually kept.

The first game of this year's season found the Dodgers pitted against the Chicago Cubs, those eternal underdogs. Sam and Uncle Gabriel handed their tickets to the collector and made their way to the section they had sat in for the last ten years.

"Think Puig will be as awesome as he was last year, Uncle G?" Sam asked, pulling his blue baseball hat down over his eyes to guard against the sun.

Uncle Gabriel, his pinstriped Dodgers jersey stretched across his heavysset belly, stepped gingerly aside as a family of six rushed past holding containers of popcorn and cotton candy. "Puig is the gift that keeps on giving," he said, looking back at Sam. "Don't worry—he'll make us proud."

They finally reached their section and headed to their seats. Uncle Gabriel took small steps down the row, shouting out greetings as they passed by old friends and fellow season-ticket holders. These guys had been sitting in the same row and section for years together and shared Sam and Uncle Gabriel's passion for the game.

Sam plopped down and took a sip from his Coke, taking in the scene of the half-full stadium in front of him, the brown mountains beyond, and the beautiful bright lights that made Dodger

Stadium visible from airplanes. Uncle Gabriel leaned forward to talk to Mr. and Mrs. Salvatore, and Sam closed his eyes and smiled. He felt like he was home.

“Ehem... Pardon me... Excuse me... Sorry... Just need to get in here.”

Sam looked up. Jessica Alder, from Sam’s eighth grade math class, was leading her dad down the row of seats, looking glum. She sat right next to Sam and made a production of setting her purse down on her feet so that it didn’t touch the ground.

“Hi, Jessica,” Sam said.

She looked up in fake surprise. “Oh hi, Sam. How are you?”

“Pretty good. I didn’t know you liked baseball,” he said.

She twitched her head toward her dad, who was looking around at the stadium with the same rapturous expression that had been on Sam’s face just a few moments before. “He loves it. He just bought season tickets, and my brother couldn’t go tonight, so my mom decided we needed some father-daughter time.” She rolled her eyes. “I don’t even understand how baseball works.”

Sam smiled. “Want me to teach you?”

Jessica smiled back and nodded.

It was the first time Sam barely paid attention to a baseball game without being overly upset. He liked talking to Jessica: despite her initial negativity, she actually seemed to get into the game and had even heckled a player or two by the top of the seventh. She didn’t laugh at Uncle Gabriel, who was watching with extreme concentration, a small pencil pressed to a pad of notebook paper filled with numbers and notes about the individual players. During the seventh-inning stretch, she sang the baseball fan’s pledge of allegiance with gusto, and let her dad hug her when the Dodgers won. Sam couldn’t help wondering if maybe, at some game in the future, he himself would hug her if the Dodgers won.

“Maybe I’ll come to the next game with my dad,” Jessica said, as she, Sam, her dad, and Uncle Gabriel made their way down the stairs, following the slow-moving crowds to the parking lots.

“That’d be cool,” Sam said. “See you in school.” He waved briefly and followed Uncle Gabriel to their car in the first lot.

Sam was quiet as they got into the car and waited in a long line of traffic to exit the stadium.

“Good game, huh?” Uncle Gabriel asked, looking at him out of the corner of his eye.

Sam felt conflicted: he had really liked watching the game with Jessica, but he had barely paid attention to the action itself. He didn’t regret talking with Jessica, but he definitely regretted missing the game. “Yeah, I guess so,” he said.

Uncle Gabriel laughed. “Will that young lady be at many games this season?”

“Probably,” Sam said, feeling sick—how many games would he miss?

“Don’t worry about it, Sammy!” Uncle Gabriel said. “Baseball games should be fun in all sorts of different ways. Don’t be too hard on yourself.” He chuckled and patted Sam’s shoulder. “You can always stay home and watch on TV!”

Sam punched his shoulder and grinned.

Poetry Passage

“Beclouded,” by Emily Dickinson

The sky is low, the clouds are mean,
A travelling flake of snow
Across a barn or through a rut
Debates if it will go.

A narrow wind complains all day
How some one treated him;
Nature, like us, is sometimes caught
Without her **diadem**¹.

¹ **Diadem** - a jeweled crown worn by a monarch