

MAPS for Piece #1
Mode- Memoir
Audience- General Public
Purpose- To Entertain/ To Expose/ To Grow
Situations- Tone, Images, and Language

“The Grip of the Glove “
By Amanda Smoker

“Heads up!” someone shouts from within the massive crowd of green and red shirts. I shield my eyes from the sun to see if I can make out the location of the ball. When I’m sure that I’m sure that I’m safe from being hit, I breathe a sigh of relief.

There is nothing like a gorgeous summer day at Dow Diamond filled with chattering fans and the image of that wave of the greenest grass with just a small mound of dirt prodding through it. Excitement roars through the crowd as balls fly through the air, only to be snatched by a glove. I lean back in my chair, smile, and just take it all in as my mind drifts back to what brought me here in the first place.

I didn’t always like baseball; in fact, you could say I despised it. That didn’t matter to my family, though. As a child, I was constantly reminded of how important baseball was to my family. Though the legacy started long before I was born, my earliest memories of the sport probably started with our weekly family trips to Grandpa Smoker’s, where we might be lucky enough to hear him tell stories about his training with the minor league team the Washington Senators and how he chose to start a family over a career in baseball. His obvious love of the sport was passed down to his children, most of which either played at a young age or at least attended games with him. All of this is probably what led to my father excelling in baseball in high school, being asked to play as a sophomore on the Varsity team that won the state title that year. Yes, the Smoker family is deeply rooted in a history of “America’s favorite pastime”.

For me, baseball was something that was at first forced upon me. My dislike for it probably started with the fact that I was signed up for softball without much of a choice. It’s not that the sport bored me to death, but it was the fact that I was not as fortunate as my grandpa, dad, and brother in inheriting the skill to play such a sport. *Why I should be interested in something that I’m not very good at?* I’d think to myself.

It makes me shudder to recall the memories of my days playing Peewee and Lassie League. Game after game I suffered the embarrassment of being labeled the “strikeout queen”. When I was fortunate enough to actually get a hit, I was usually being laughed at by my family for gripping my helmet as I ran, fearful that it might fly off my head and expose my hat hair to the crowd of people in the stands. Not that my family would ever let me forget, since many of these graceful moments were caught on video.

Yes, I suppose that maybe I was just “too girly” for such a physically and mentally challenging sport. It’s easy to see why I didn’t like much of anything associated with it.

My sister and brother were “encouraged” to play as well. While my sister was slightly better than I was (a fact she took pride in), she was nowhere near the skill level that was needed to play the sport beyond the age of ten. Much like myself, Hannah accepted her lack of talent in the sport and took on other interests.

Matthew, however, continued to excel; he was Dad’s star. No... scratch that. He was the Smoker family’s star. As my younger brother aged, it was obvious he had the same talent that my grandpa and father had when it came to baseball. In order to “show him some support”, Mom and Dad were constantly whisking my sister and I off to see Matt’s games, from Peewee league on up through high school. Matt was being signed up for baseball camps, traveling leagues, and anything else that my parents thought would keep him in the game. Unlike my sister and I, my brother reveled in baseball; he not only wanted to play and watch baseball, but he also seemed to want to LIVE baseball, which was made apparent by his bedroom that was polluted by bobble heads of his favorite players, pennants, trophies, and even a baseball comforter. Walking past his over-accessorized room on a daily basis to get to mine made me like the sport even less.

I wish I could say that I came to love going to his games with my family as I matured a bit, but I’d be lying about that. Rather, both my sister and I seemed to just grow more resentful of it.

“They’re going to his game over my track meet again,” my sister would complain to me.

“Are you surprised?” I’d ask her, both of us knowing that the answer was silently hanging in the air. There wasn’t really much else to be said. We could voice these concerns to our parents for the hundredth time, but it’d just result in us being told we were being ridiculous.

As a somewhat selfish teenager, it appeared to me as though everything in my family’s life was about baseball. Rather than recognizing the importance of such a symbol at the time, I focused on how disgusted I was by family choices made involving the sport. Most of our family vacations became about baseball: a trip to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, day trips to a Tigers game, and even overnight trips to places like Auburn Hills for Matt’s summer ball tournaments. It seemed impossible to escape the grip of the glove.

But, soon enough, it was time for me to leave home and go off to college. Once I hit that milestone, I swore off sports. I wanted to excel in my studies, get a job, and travel. It seemed completely plausible that I could live the rest of my life without attending another baseball game. The thought that I was free of the sport was so empowering.

Despite the fact I was no longer living at home, my parents would still call to let me know about certain rivalry games coming up or tournaments that Matt's team would be in. While I'd always wish him well, I made little effort to make the two and half hour trek back to the hometown to see any of these games. I had managed to find other interests while I was away and had convinced myself that baseball just didn't fit anymore. I didn't seem to miss it, and my parents quit pushing the issue.

Upon graduating from college, I was completely engulfed in finding a job; baseball was not even a minute thought in my brain. Who had time for such a silly thing while trying to find the place where I would finally put all that knowledge I gained from college into use? I didn't have the time nor the desire to attend Matt's high school games, no matter how well the team was doing.

When I finally did manage to land myself a teaching job, I was surprised to see that I'd be staying around the same area that I had called home for the last four years. Midland County had several appeals: great neighborhoods, lots of activities, and many business for shopping and dining. I was satisfied with this. Finally, I was independent, and I'd still be over 150 miles from that baseball crazy family of mine.

However, it didn't take long for me to start reflecting on what had brought me here. As day in and day out I worked with students who reminded me of my siblings and my own childhood, I started to miss my family. I found that when I would think of them, I no longer cringed at the image of my brother lugging his bat and glove home. Instead, I found myself longing for those days! Absurd as it may sound, I missed the whole family piling into the family vehicle and driving short and long distances to watch Matt do what he loved. I missed seeing the excitement on my mom's face as Matt hit another homerun and the anxiety in my dad's eyes as he watched the attempt to steal yet another base.

I found myself baffled. Stunned, really. How could this be? I spent years trying to distance myself from these things, and now I wanted those moments back?

I tried to ignore it; I tried to pretend like that nagging feeling of wanting to round up the family to watch another game was really just me not wanting to grow up and be an adult and that once I got settled in my job that it would go away. But then something happened, something that reconnected me to that sport in a way that I never thought could happen.

In the spring of 2006, big news came to the Midland area: construction would begin on a baseball diamond that would be home to a minor league baseball team affiliated with the Dodgers. Not only was the community excited about all the opportunities that this would open up, but they were also heavily involved in the contest of naming the team.

The excitement seeped into my classroom, and it was contagious. Students speculated about possible names for the team and even about what it'd be like to have another summer activity so close by. Several of my students brought in newspaper clippings and shared stories about their contest entries. I could feel the glove's presence once again.

Something was different, though. Instead of being annoyed by all the baseball talk, I was starting to feel just as excited as my students. Listening to them chatter as pictures started appearing in the newspaper and online of the new stadium plans made me eager to see the finished product. And I couldn't help but be excited as the name Great Lakes Loons was announced as the contest winner. What I had once thought was impossible actually occurred: I actually *wanted* to be a part of baseball.

As I spent summer days recalling my past with this sport, it hit me: baseball was part of my family's history. It wasn't just Matt's 'thing'. It was a family 'thing': a piece of the Smoker family heritage. I didn't have to be good at playing the sport to appreciate it or be a part of it. No longer was I that selfish teenager who, let's be honest, at one time thought the world revolved around her; I was finally maturing and figuring out that I belonged to something that was about so much more than just me.

Within just a few short months of the announcement of the Loons coming to mid-Michigan, I was on the phone with my parents, gossiping about the newest developments in Midland's incoming team. I didn't stop there, though. Soon, I was inquiring about Matt's last few games as a high school student. Due to work, I couldn't make it to all of them, but I did squeeze in a couple. Mom and Dad never questioned the sudden interest in baseball; I think they were just excited to see that I had finally 'come around'.

Matt is now playing baseball for Olivet College, and I attend games whenever I can. I even purchased a plane ticket in the spring of 2009 to go with my family down to Florida to watch his spring training games. He's most likely going to be done with baseball after he graduates from college, but I think that the whole family is just fine with that.

As for me? Well, I was there on the first day the Loons played their inaugural game and for many games after that. I go with my sister, friends, and I've even managed to get my parents to a game. It has become one of my favorite summer activities.

It's funny how growing up gives you a new perspective on something that has been present your whole life. And I think about this as I watch the family just arriving to Dow Diamond pile into their seats in front of me. I turn to my friend and smile. He doesn't know why I'm smiling, but it doesn't matter.

I perk up as the next batter hits a fly ball. The player in centerfield readies his glove; the crowd boos because they know what will happen. We've watched this happen

so many times before. He raises his glove ever so slightly and lets the ball settle comfortably in his grip, like it belongs there.