

## Timing the Turn

by Ronald McGuire

The locker room was a place I never understood. But I never sought out organized sports until I started high school.

I joined the swim team because I liked the water.

I was good at swimming, even better at attracting the attention of the older boys after practice. I was tall for my age.

I didn't understand their attention until later, until I'd learned the truth about the world. But I knew who I was, even then.

One finally broke the silent barrier of looks and moves and eyes wandering. The space came so naturally to him, but not me.

He asked me, standing there naked, all seventeen years of him, if I'd swum on a team before.

"No," I said, and used my towel to hide.

"You're good," he said, hiding nothing, "but your turn is sloppy, your timing sucks."

"How do I..."

"Coach doesn't give a shit about freshman. If you wanna learn, I can teach you."

"I don't..."

"Do you wanna fix that flop or not?"

I had to look at something. The locker felt like cowardice, the floor felt like shame, the ceiling never occurred to me, so I settled on his eyes.

"Yeah, I'm new..."

"No shit Sherlock," he said. "Can you stick around?"

"No...my mom is waiting..."

"Too bad, maybe next time."

He turned, twisting the world around him, tossing me away and behind.

There was never a next time. I wondered for years about his motives. The time came when I imagined his intentions, dreamt of them, and wished I'd stayed there and learned to time the turn.

Sophomore year I played football.

I lost track of him that year and tried to purge his presence from my thoughts, even as his memory lingered against my will.

I was a freshman in college when I saw him again, in another locker room. I was approaching nineteen. A lot had changed.

He recognized me as I did him. There was more of him to see, a statuesque structure of muscle built on the foundation of his youthful swimmer's build, beautiful cliché in bronze.

"Well, look at you, all grown up."

I reveled in his recognition.

"You too," I said, looking down from the height attained in a spectacular burst of growth my junior year. For sport I looked him over, returning the favor of years ago.

I wasn't shy anymore.

"You been workin' out here all year?" he asked.

"No, since the season ended, when it rains. Closer to my dorm."

I didn't care what he was about to ask me.

"So, you wanna..."

"Yes."

"OK," he laughed, "meet me out front." He started back toward his clothes, then stopped.

"You drink beer?"

"No, how about some coffee," I said.

"Sure, ok, coffee it is," he tossed back and continued walking. He took his time taking his leave and I took full advantage.

I showered and dressed in a hurry, part of me expecting not to see him again.

He was there, waiting beneath the portico, leaning against a concrete column in jeans and a crimson jacket, a modern-day James Dean.

“Okay to walk?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said, “the rain’s not too bad.”

Somewhere between there and the coffee shop, halfway between heaven and earth, as our conversation built a bridge across time, he slipped his hand into mine as easy as letter into a box, enough pressure for me to know he meant it.

“Have you been waiting for me?” I asked.

He laughed and gave a squeeze that found it’s way up my arm, swirled around my chest, then landed in my brain, reassuring me the laughter wasn’t cruel.

“No,” he said, “well, maybe. I’ve been waiting for someone. Now here you are.”

“How did you know, back then?”

“High school? Are you kidding? I didn’t know shit. I knew I liked you, but I couldn’t say why. Mostly I was scared. Part of me thought you didn’t like me because I’m black.”

“You’re more brown than black,” I said, quoting a movie.

“And you’re more pink than white,” he said, catching the reference like an outfielder catches a pop fly.

I thought about what might have been, had I been a little older. I never saw him as scared, but in retrospect it made sense.

“What about you?” he asked.

“I think I’m what they call a late bloomer,” I said.

Our laughter echoed across the brick wall and pathway, collected by the falling rain shushing through the branches watching over us.

“Well, you’ve definitely bloomed, if that’s the analogy you want to use,” he said.

We reached a turn that would take us from the secluded pathway through a colonnade, then into the open quad.

I pulled him to a stop.

“I think you have been waiting for me,” I said.

“What makes you...?”

“Because I’ve been waiting for me too,” I said, “it makes sense.”

“You have to explain that one.”

“Even if we didn’t understand then, we both knew what we wanted. I just had to catch up, and maybe you had to slow down. Like you said, here we are.”

He leaned in to kiss me, our first kiss, my first kiss. It shook my core and left me gasping for air.

“I caught you,” I said, my words forming clouds above us.

We stepped into the open and his hand fell from mine as a stone falls from a ledge.

The windows of the quad stared down, innumerable eyes behind their darkness.

Our separation a silent acknowledgement that we weren’t as fearless as we thought, disquiet measurable in the space between us.

We covered a lifetime in a hundred paces, then left the monoliths of higher education behind, his hand again finding mine.

We would not live that way forever.

We learned to live our lives at our own deliberate pace, giving the world time to catch up to where we’d arrived, hand in hand no matter who was watching.