

Stepping into the World of Men · *Mary Helen Stefaniak*

AFTER SIX SEASONS of nothing but leaves, on April 26th, three days before my wife was leaving without us for places like Zagreb, Skopje, Dubrovnik, and an unpronounceable Yugoslav city whose name begins, ridiculously, with the letters LJ, my peach trees burst into bloom. Sweet-smelling white blossoms with the faintest blush of pink at the center. So many you could hardly see the leaves.

When Madeline came downstairs that morning, I led her to the back porch where I'd laid out breakfast facing the explosion of peach blossoms. I had one small but loaded branch blooming strategically in a jar near her plate.

"They're lovely," she said, meaning: You just don't know when to quit, do you?

"They're a miracle," I said, meaning: Even Mother Nature says, STAY HOME.

Two years ago Madeline was answering telephones part-time; now she's got an inside-track, upper-management position in a biomedical supply company about to establish relations with what they call their sister company in Yugoslavia. For the past nine months, Madeline has been studying Intensive Serbo-Croat, sticking signs and labels all over the house: "ormar," says the cupboard; "šećer," says the sugar bowl; "kupati," says the index card on our bathroom door. My daughters—even little Lauren, who's only five—sweetly whisper, "Laku noć, Daddy," when I go in to kiss them goodnight. As for me, I can't pronounce the names of half the places Madeline wants to drag us off to—and I don't believe for a minute that it's only for the summer. Already they're hinting around to me about the exceptional opportunities overseas for English-speaking biology teachers. *Whom* are they trying to kid? "Next thing you know," I told Madeline, "they'll be talking about permanent dislocation."

She laughed. "Don't you mean *relocation*?"

"For you, maybe."

I didn't want to go to Yugoslavia even before my peach trees bloomed. I made a list of things that I couldn't put off another summer—hornets in

the attic, crumbling concrete steps out front, the course syllabus I should have overhauled semesters ago. But Madeline wasn't impressed. "Get serious," she said with a sigh.

When my son asked me to sign him up for Little League, I figured that was about as serious as we could get. Jeff was eleven, and he'd never played a game of fast-pitch baseball in his life, but he didn't want to go to Yugoslavia either. What if there were no video arcades in Zagreb? no frog ponds in Skopje?

"But baseball!" my wife exclaimed when I told her. She was already packing her bags then, weeks in advance. "You hate baseball."

"I don't *hate* baseball."

She was folding my favorite blue sweater of hers. "He doesn't know the rules," she said. "He doesn't even know the positions."

"I've been making him some diagrams."

"Diagrams?" she said, as she put the blue sweater into the alarmingly large suitcase that lay open on the bed between us. She straightened up and looked at me. "You'd better take him to the park and throw him a few."

She wanted to ask me again, I know, if I'd thought this through. She wanted to remind me that we weren't talking about a day's drive north to visit her mother in Green Bay or even a week of biomedical meetings in Baltimore or Tuscaloosa. (We weren't talking about baseball either, by the way.) We were talking about three months, with an ocean and most of two continents between us. To go or not to go meant more than separate vacations; it amounted to a major policy decision. She wanted to say there was still time for me to change my mind.

"We'll practice everyday," I said, calmly, although my heart was pounding. I watched her fold a pair of pajamas—new ones I'd never seen her wear.

"He'll need a glove," she said. She put the pajamas into the suitcase, smoothing them for a long time before she clicked the lid shut. When she looked up at me, her face looked the way I felt. She said, softly this time, her voice unsteady, "You'd better get him a glove."

We all cried at the airport, much to the dismay of the biomedical vice-presidents and sales execs who were going to Yugoslavia with my wife. My daughters clung to their mother's wrinkle-resistant raincoat and wept without restraint. Jeff was red-eyed and sniffing in his new White Sox cap. Madeline and I grieved more discreetly, each of us believing that the

other was to blame for the pain of this parting, which carried in it, we also believed, the threat of future partings, of our choosing worlds to be happy in that failed to coincide.

At the first practice, the head coach lined Jeff up with all the other boys (no *girls* on the team, my daughter Liz noticed), most of them five- or six-season veterans, and paired them off to play catch. My son had owned his glove for all of a week.

We'd spent that week trying to prepare ourselves—fielding flies and grounders, diagramming plays, thinking through the consequences. Even in the car on the way to the park, I kept it up. "Suppose you're in left field," I said.

"They'd never put me in *left* field, Dad," Jeff said, indicating that at least he'd learned the relative importance of various fielding positions.

"You're in left field," I repeated. "There's a runner on second and on third. Got that? Now. Let's say the batter hits a high fly ball to left field—"

"And I suppose Jeff *catches* it?" said Liz, who suspected all along that Little League stood between her and her mother in Yugoslavia.

"Hey," Jeff said. "What if I did. What if I *did* catch it?"

"In the *teeth* maybe," said Liz. Lauren, beside her in the back seat, giggled.

Jeff started to protest, but then stopped to think. "Would that count, Dad? Would the batter be out if the fielder caught the ball with his teeth?"

It was a question I wouldn't have thought to ask when I was eleven. "I guess so," I said. "I guess the batter'd be out. Of course, so would the teeth."

"Well, what if you, like, caught it, like, between your knees?"

"Dangerous situation," I said, and Lauren giggled again. "But I'd say the batter would be out."

Now Liz was taking an interest. "What if you caught it in your shirt?" she said. "If you made like a net with your shirt and caught it that way? Would that count, Daddy? Would the batter be out?"

"I don't know—oh, I suppose so. As long as your *person* keeps the ball from hitting the ground, the batter's out." I hoped that would end it.

"But," said Jeff slyly, picking up his new glove from the seat between us and tracing the stitching with his thumb, "what if the ball was going so fast it went right *into* the fielder and got stuck in him?"

“Gross,” said Lauren.

Jesus, I thought. They’ll never get him to charge the ball.

“Would the batter be out, Dad?”

I decided to be matter-of-fact. “The batter would be out.”

“Would they call the game then? If somebody hit a line drive and killed an outfielder?”

“I’m sure they would,” I said, “but I don’t think any kid in this league could—”

“Would the batter’s team forfeit?”

“Look,” I said. By now my palms were sweaty on the wheel and I was glad to see the park entrance ahead. “I doubt if the rule book covers death in the outfield”—I glanced at Jeff beside me—“which never happens anyway, and I don’t want to talk about this any more.” As we made the turn into the park, I already had the sinking feeling that I’d made a big mistake, perhaps several. We got out of the car and walked toward a knot of boys untangling into two long lines in the open field beyond the parking lot. “I bet they *would* have to forfeit,” Liz said, just before we got there.

“But,” Jeff objected as he left us, walking backwards, to join the group, “what if the umpire didn’t see it?”

I spent the rest of the first practice alone, the girls having deserted me for the sandbox. I watched my son lob and chase the ball, trying to draw it into his glove at least once in a while by my concentration alone, thinking things like, Charge it, Jeff! Step into it! Memories I’d held off until now elbowed their way into consciousness—memories of lobbing and chasing my way through a Little League season twenty-five years ago, of flinching from fastballs at the plate, of finding out that I wasn’t good enough as is, in spite of what my mother’d always told me. I remembered how much it had hurt me to learn that, and for the first time—sitting on the grass in the treacherous May sunshine, pretending to listen as Jeff’s coach explained the logical connection between uniforms and candy sales, surrounded by Little League parents, of whom I was one—I felt the full weight of having let my son in for the same lesson.

And that wasn’t all. As the father—I suddenly realized—I was going to have to go through it all again. Not just the fielding errors and the flinching, but the whole terrible business of growing up—unrelievable restlessness, irretrievable loss, the loneliness and vulnerability of innocence just beginning to crumble—all that grief I’d thought was behind me suddenly

lay ahead of me again. All that grief times *three*. Madeline, if she had been there, probably would have smiled at this revelation, but she, we know, was an ocean and most of two continents away. I was alone, and stunned.

I stood up, thinking of escape, and took a giant step to the end of my row of parents. From there I shielded my eyes to look for my daughters—my *little* girls—in the sandbox on the far side of the field. Flat on her back in the sand, flapping her arms and legs to make an angel, Lauren seemed safe enough—calm, unsuspecting, oblivious enough. But Lizzie was sitting off to the side, watching the sand sift through her fingers. At the grand old age of seven and a half, she already looked a little too pensive for me. And what about Jeff? He was still out there lobbing and chasing, looking precariously taller and thinner than I had ever seen him before, with that new glove on the end of his arm like a growth. I felt an urge to dash across the field and rescue him—shielding my head from flying baseballs, running the gauntlet to save my boy, to take him home with me, where his frog was waiting for him to trap juicy flies and junebugs and couldn't care less if he could catch a *ball* or not.

Instead, I sat down. Up front, the coach had gotten as far as distributing the fund-raising candy, checking off names on a clipboard as his assistant handed out 20-count cartons of chocolate bars. When he called our name, I raised my hand and accepted our share.

I didn't write to Madeline right away. Her mailing address changed every couple of days at first, and I didn't like the idea of my letters lying abandoned in one foreign post office after another. Left behind.

Two games into regular season play—nearly a month after the first practice—Madeline finally sent us a postcard with her “permanent” address, and, although I didn't much like the sound of that, I sat down to write the first long letter I'd ever had occasion to write her in thirteen years of marriage. Most of it was about baseball.

I was as honest as I knew how to be. I didn't try to hide the fact that we lost the opener, 24–zip, the game called in accordance with Little League rules regarding hopeless cases, after four innings of walking Yankee batters all the way home. I told her pitching was not our strong suit. I told her Jeff struck out once and walked twice in the first game and got a base hit in the second, but died on third every time. I even admitted that he got hit square in the back by a wild and powerful pitch, but he wasn't hurt, he was fine. I

didn't tell her how he dropped the bat and arched his back when the ball hit him, or how visions of Jeff in traction, of Jeff paralyzed for life, flashed through my mind in the two long seconds before he turned slowly and walked, with the coach's arm around him, to first base, where he stood, fighting tears (while I sat, fighting tears, in the bleachers). I just said, Maddie, you should see your son crouching in right field with his hands on his knees, waiting for the swing, looking for all the world like a baseball player. I can tell which one is Jeff because his jersey says No. 9, but sometimes I have to scan the field and wonder, where's my boy?

It was a good letter. In the end, I told her that we all missed her (especially me), that a box turtle had followed Lauren home from kindergarten, and that my peach blossoms had set and left us with a bumper crop of green baby peaches. Then I put my letter, along with Lauren's drawing of the turtle, Lizzie's painstaking page and a half that I had to swear not to read because it was private, and Jeff's three-line note, into an envelope. It was hard to seal it—that seemed too final, like closing the door on someone, or hanging up the telephone—so I left it open in my shirt pocket while we walked down to the post office, where we made copies, in case the letter got lost in the mail. It had a long way to go, after all.

The very next day ("By magic!" Lizzie said; "Or ESP," said Jeff), we got our first full-length letter from Madeline. We'd had daily postcards and some phone calls—most with such bad connections that Lauren came away from her turn convinced that Lizzie must be right when she said that Mom would forget how to speak English—but this was a big fat envelope with separate envelopes for each of us inside, and pictures. There was one of Madeline smiling beside a little black car with an orchard full of flowering trees behind her. ("Peaches!" the back of the picture said.) The one Lauren found most promising showed Madeline on a beach, lined up with three of her grinning biomedical compatriots and three unsmiling Slavs, one of whom (the one next to Madeline) looked like Omar Sharif. They all had their shoes off and, where necessary, their pant legs rolled up.

"Look—Mom's swimming in Yugoslavia!" Lauren said.

Late that night, after the children were in bed, I considered the beach shot again over a can of beer at the kitchen table. I flipped it over and read, "Dubrovnik," in Madeline's up-and-down hand. "Resort town. Beautiful beaches." Then, in sly parentheses, "On the Adriatic Sea."

"I know that," I said out loud to the picture. "I know that Yugoslavia is on the Adriatic Sea."

But I didn't know it.

"Hey, Dad," somebody said, and I jumped.

Jeff was in the kitchen doorway, in the torn shorts and T-shirt he uses for pajamas. "I forgot," he said, holding up the jar he uses to catch his frog's dinner. I nodded. He squinted at the jar in the air in front of his nose for a moment as if he expected, instead of emptiness, a spontaneous generation of junebugs. Then he lowered it and looked at me. "Dad," he said. "You know what?"

"What?"

"Mick—he's on first, you know?—Mick asked if I'd help him get a frog. After a game maybe."

Mick is barely four feet tall and he cries every time he strikes out, but he can field a ball like nobody's business. "Sure," I said. "Why not?"

"Maybe tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow's fine."

Jeff stayed where he was, in the doorway, rolling the jar between his palms. After a moment or two of my waiting for it to slip and shatter around his bare feet, he said, "Who were you talking to?"

"Me?" I said. He nodded. "Just now, you mean?" He nodded again. I was casual. "Oh, nobody really. Myself, I guess."

"Oh," he said. I thought he'd go then, but he stayed, hugging the jar to his chest. "You know," he said, "I told Lizzie she was crazy, what she said about Mom. People don't forget to speak English that fast."

"No," I said.

"I mean, it's like riding a bike. You never forget a thing like that."

"No," I said, "you never forget."

He disappeared into the back hall shadows then. The screen door squeaked. I looked again at the snapshot of Omar and friends on the beach. I thought, my wife is ankle-deep in the Adriatic Sea, and I'm not even sure if the water sloshing around her toes is sweet or salt.

Divorce, I soon learned, was rampant in our little corner of the Little League. A lot of White Sox—including our tearful first baseman Mick—alternated parents on a weekly basis, and we lost our best pitcher (the only one capable of throwing a strike) to a custody dispute in Des Moines. I heard more than one father complain that at least they could have waited until the season was over.

And then there was Eric the catcher's mother, who got so excited that she knocked her lawnchair over backwards jumping up to scream, "Hurry! Hurry! Hurry!" during a textbook-perfect slide that Jeff accidentally executed—on a pop fly the shortstop dropped—in the last inning of the first game the White Sox won that season. (Accidental or not, it was a beautiful thing to see, I wrote Madeline, a graceful glide home.) The catcher's mother even ran over as Jeff came off the field and gave him a high five while a slow, sweet grin of amazement spread across his dusty face. Apparently, they knew each other.

"Oh yeah. She helps at practice sometimes," Jeff told me. "Her name's Jean."

I knew her from observation only as a woman who came to the games dressed to the teeth in designer sportswear or flouncy sundresses and sat with her neighborhood support group in lawn chairs on the first base side, while a guy who was obviously her estranged husband—a pest exterminator from the look of his truck—hunched on the ground behind the dugout or played catch with their son, stealing glances at her all the while across the bleachers. To tell the truth, I wrote Madeline, they both steal glances at each other across the bleachers.

But there were plenty of things I did not tell Madeline about the catcher's mother. I never mentioned how long and tan her legs were, or how she struck up a conversation with me after the Perfect Slide by asking what language my daughters were speaking under the bleachers—was it Russian?—or how we got to talking, she and I, first about Yugoslavia and what my wife was doing there, then about Little League—"This is your son's *first* season? He's *never* played before? How *brave* of him"—moving quickly through the weather, gardening, and peaches (her favorite fruit), to the difficulties of being a single parent—"even *temporarily*." I also left out of my letters how she took us all out for ice cream to celebrate the slide and the ensuing victory—her boy, my two girls, Jeff and me. I surprised myself that evening by having a nice time, except for a few painful seconds walking away from the field, when I happened to glance over my shoulder and glimpse the face of a man watching his kid leave with his wife—and somebody else. I was remembering the look on his face when I went home and wrote Madeline the longest letter yet, ending it with a postscript in purple crayon:

P.S. Come home soon. Without you I will surely die. Of pneumonia. From taking cold showers.

I'd made it halfway through the season—and my green peaches were beginning to show promise of someday growing fuzz and turning sweet—when Jeff came running to the bleachers in the top of the fifth, with the score at 2 and 2. He was excited. “I get to play second base!” he said.

The White Sox were trying hard to maintain a two-game winning streak at the time, and all of our opponents' runs so far had been the work of a pair of lefties, one of whom was the only girl in the League and both of whom had sent the ball long and high to right field, where Jeff should have caught it. Jean the catcher's mother, who was sitting in the bleachers that day in a denim mini-skirt, had socked my arm gently the first time Jeff let the ball sail over his head and patted it sympathetically the second, her knee pressing ever so slightly against my thigh. I avoided the eyes of the other parents.

“And Nolan?” I asked Jeff. The regular secondbaseman.

“He's playing right field—can I have a quarter for licorice?”

It was a calculated risk the coach was taking, I thought as I dug into my pockets. Vacations and divorce settlements had left him with only enough White Sox to cover the field—moving his weak spots around was about the best he could do. Sure enough, first pitch next inning, their first lefty—the boy—got a double off a hit that Nolan *almost* caught, recovered, and pelted to the shortstop to hold the runner at second. I heaved a sigh of relief. Our pitcher—a new and, for us, inappropriately capable boy—was so nervous, what with Jeff and a runner at second, that he threw the next batter three balls between strikes two and three. That made one out and one man on base when their second big hitter stepped up to the plate. The other lefty. The girl. (She reminded me of my sister, a great hitter born twenty years too early, who used to sit in the bleachers and yell, “Elbows up, Johnny—hey! Step into it!”) As the girl tapped first one heel and then the other with the tip of her bat, I happened to catch Jeff's eye. He grinned at me and smacked his fist into his glove.

After that, things happened fast. There was the pitch, the crack of the bat, and Nolan was deep in right field, charging the ball—not the fly ball we were all expecting, but a line drive so low I would have let it go for safety's sake. The other runner sprang brazenly off second base, leaving Jeff behind with his glove held out in front of him, probably the only person in the park who fully expected Nolan to do exactly what he did—dive for it, roll, and come up grinning, with the ball in his glove held high.

The stands erupted—chairs overturned, pop spilled, babies startled into tears— and the runner, halfway to third by now, scrambled to get back. Nolan must not have heard the coach’s frenzied “Shortstop! To the shortstop!” Nolan must have been on autopilot, or simply out of his head, because the next thing he did was throw the ball to second base. To Jeff. The crowd stopped, aghast, in midscream.

Then a miracle occurred. Without moving an inch to the left or right, Jeff held out his glove and the ball came right to it. He staggered back a step on impact, staring at it—a surprising egg in a brown nest. An instant later, the desperate runner crashed into him from behind. All at once, Nolan and the shortstop were pounding Jeff’s back in ecstasy, the pitcher was throwing his cap in the air, and our bushy-browed coach, at first base, was looking incredulous. Jean gripped my arm and shouted, “He caught it! He caught it!” Lauren and Lizzie even poked their heads out from under the bleachers to ask, in English, what was going on. “A double play!” Jean yelled at them.

But something was wrong out on the field. The White Sox weren’t retiring. The runner who’d collided with Jeff seemed to be crying, holding his stomach as if he’d taken a punch. The screaming and hugging in the stands subsided into silence as our coach strode over to the little conference developing in the vicinity of second base, where Jeff and Nolan and the sniffing runner looked at their shoes while the enemy coach pointed at my son and said angry things I couldn’t quite make out.

In the end, the runner returned to second base, Jeff went to right field, Nolan back to second, and the news spread to the spectators: the other coach had accused Jeff of obstructing the runner, shoving him away from the base. The umpire hadn’t seen it. They argued. The cords on the coach’s sunburned neck stood out so far that I could see them from the bleachers, but the ump held firm, and that would have been that.

Except that Jeff confessed. Not to obstructing the runner, the way the coach said, but to something else that no one had noticed. Jeff told them he’d forgotten, in the excitement of finding the ball in his glove, that he had to touch the base. But he must have tagged the *guy*, right? the baffled umpire said. That depended on what you meant by *tagged*, Jeff countered. He got the runner in the stomach with his elbow all right, but he never actually touched him with the ball. From the stands, we could see the umpire give our coach a helpless, hopeless look.

Three runs later, when the White Sox finally came in off the field, the coach had to grab our pitcher by the shoulder to keep him from punching my son. At some point during the rest of that inning—I must have been looking at my shoes—Jeff disappeared from the bench. In the top of the sixth, I left the girls with Jean and went looking for him.

I found him lying on his stomach by the side of the pond, eye to eye with a fat bullfrog he was holding in both hands. His white knickers were algae-green to mid-thigh, his socks and leggings in a muddy heap at the water's edge. He didn't look up when I sat down on the damp grass beside him. He said, apparently to the frog, in a voice that rose and plunged dangerously, "I thought it didn't count if the umpire didn't see it."

"Jeff," I said—my son, my boy, my firstborn, my life all over again. He didn't look at me. "Jeff." I resorted to an old ploy he'd probably outgrown. I said, "I want to tell you a secret."

He looked up. His eyes were hardly red, but the dirty streaks under his nose and across both cheeks gave him away. "Yeah?"

"I hate baseball," I said.

Jeff rolled his eyes and turned back to the frog. "I know *that*," he said.

"You do?" I thought about all the diagrams and practicing and speculating I had done so cheerfully. "How do you know that?"

He shrugged and sat up, clapping his baseball cap over the frog, who ribbed in protest. "I guess you're not so great at hiding how you feel about stuff either." He sniffled.

"Oh." I had a fleeting, frightening thought then about my letters to Madeline, and about Jean the catcher's mother, and whether it was true that what the umpire didn't see didn't count. I came back with, "But you don't know *why* I hate baseball." I paused. "Not even your mother knows that."

"Why, then?" he said.

So I told him the story about my sister—the one who could hit and catch and pitch the pants off any kid on the playground, only they didn't allow girls in Little League back then, and who was always telling me to keep my elbows up at the plate. I told him that she had gone to my coach behind my back and begged him to boot me off the team. I couldn't hit, I couldn't catch, I couldn't throw, she said. What was worse, I seemed maddeningly unaware that I couldn't.

Jeff interrupted. "Couldn't you, really?"

“What—hit, you mean?”

“And throw and catch?”

You’d think a boy would give his dad a break. “I guess I wasn’t up to my sister’s standards,” I told him. I wasn’t even close.

The baseball cap hopped tentatively. Jeff stretched one leg out to keep it from escaping, pressing the visor into the grass with his toes. “So did the coach bump you?”

“No, he said he couldn’t do it, no matter what, on principle.”

“Did you know your sister did that?”

“Yes. She told me afterward. Said she was sorry.”

“So did you quit?”

“No. I guess I stuck it out on principle, too.” I sighed, remembering.

Jeff thought about that. He curled his toes off the visor of his cap and watched it make its boldest leap yet toward the water. Then he asked, “What principle?”

It was a good question. My mind leapt to the shores of the Adriatic, where I saw Madeline on a beach, looking lonely. “I don’t know what principle,” I said.

The cap hopped again and Jeff had to lunge for it, plucking it off just in time for the bullfrog to splash into the pond with a throaty and triumphant croak. “I wonder if they have frogs in Yugoslavia,” he said. I told him they probably did.

On the following Wednesday, at 5:15, while I sat under a peach tree thinking about Madeline and waiting for my fruit to ripen, Jeff surprised me by coming out on the porch in full uniform, with his glove under his arm. He said, “I’m ready to go,” and thundered down the wooden steps to the driveway. At the park, our new pitcher turned his back when he saw us coming, but the catcher’s mother waved from her lawnchair, Nolan said, “Hi, Jeff,” and little Mick (who’s on first, remember) gravely nodded hello. Jeff got a hit in the fourth inning—his second of the season—but died on third as usual. After the game, he took Mick and Nolan down to the pond and caught a frog for each of them. We were in the car, halfway home, before he told us that he’d quit the team.

“You quit?” I said, glancing over at him. He was grinning in the passenger seat. “What did you tell the coach?”

“I told him,” he said, “that we were going a-broad.” (An expression

that Jeff, in his crumbling innocence, finds amusing.) He gave me what you call a significant look.

Lauren leaned forward hopefully from the back seat. "Does that mean we can go swimming with Mom in Yugoslavia?"

They all looked at me then.

"Wait a minute," I said. "What about my peaches?"

"You could take some with you," Liz said, so quickly that I knew she'd been giving the matter some thought. I pictured myself packing hard, green peaches among my socks and underwear.

"I don't know," Jeff was saying. "Do you think American fruit could ripen on a windowsill in like, say—" he hesitated, and Liz finished for him, "Dubrovnik?"

I told them it probably could.