

Honesty

‘I want to be on the *Jumbotron!*’ Henry wails.

Holland’s son sits in the back seat of the car, crying hot, terrible tears.

Holland is picking him up at the school bus stop.

‘What’s going on, buddy?’ Holland asks, eyeing him in the rearview mirror.

‘I have to write a story for Martin Luther King’s birthday!’ Henry wails.

‘You can do that.’

‘No, I can’t’

‘Sure you can! I’ll help you. It’ll be fine.’

‘No it won’t! It has to be about overcoming difficulties. Big difficulties. Like he did.’

Henry is distraught. His class has been reading about Dr. King all week, and Henry is up on his history.

‘And? What’s the problem?’

‘My life is too easy! I don’t *have* any problems!’

Holland turns around in his seat and looks at his son.

‘I have a nice life!’ Henry sobs.

‘It’s a contest,’ Holland tells Sandra. ‘For Martin Luther King Day. What difficulties does Henry have? He’s in the second-fucking grade. As far as he’s concerned, his life has been pretty rosy so far.’

Holland explains about the prize, the complimentary tickets to an early spring game and being introduced on the Jumbotron.

‘The *Jumbotron?*’ Sandra asks, only half listening. She is focused on her homework. Sandra is studying child psychology, which can be a problem in a marriage where parenting is involved. She is working on her master’s degree with an eye to becoming a substance abuse counselor for children of adult alcoholics, which, according to her, would include Holland and about everyone else he knows, including herself.

‘Exactly. A nice little white boy who lives in a safe, leafy neighborhood with two loving parents. What big problems does he have to overcome, compared with some of those other kids?’ Holland asks.

What *other* kids? I’m not sure what you mean by *those other kids*, Holland.’

Something familiar in her tone stops Holland short. He knows instinctively that when Sandra calls him by name she is getting irritated with him, but he usually ignores the signs and bulls right through anyway. Even though she might be writing a paper on the ravages of drug addiction and suicide, Sandra is always ready to lay down a rhetorical trap, which Holland is usually not intuitive or quick enough to avoid falling into.

Sandra has always been hypersensitive to anything that smells to her like value judgments. Often she feels the need to say something to Holland like, ‘The Dharma teaches us to turn away from our delusional thinking, which insists on constantly dividing the world into dualities of this and that, here and there, now and then, us and them, and reinforcing our discerning mind with its false sense of separation,’ which, to his ears, is about as interesting as the sound of running tap water.

You know what I mean,’ Holland says and leaves the room before she has a chance to respond.

Holland sits Henry down to talk it through.

‘What about the time you broke your arm when your mom was making lunch and you just walked right off the kitchen table?’ Holland asks him. That episode had been completely on Sandra, as far as Holland is concerned.

‘You had your arm in a cast and you had to wear a sling for eight weeks. Do you remember that red and yellow plastic car you used to drive around the yard? It had one door on the right, but you figured out how to get in and reach across to shut it with your left hand. You could say that was overcoming a difficulty, right?’

Henry remembers the car, and the broken arm, but not the part about it being Sandra’s fault, and not the reaching-across-the-car-to-shut-the-door part either. Something about this worries him.

I don’t think it counts if I don’t remember it myself. If I don’t remember it, it’s not really overcoming anything, so that is dishonest.’

Holland is impressed. Henry makes a good point.

‘OK, what about the asthma?’ Holland asks.

Up until he was about six, Henry probably had been to the emergency room three or four times a year because of severe difficulty breathing, almost always with Holland, mostly because he drives so much faster than Sandra, and because he doesn’t really sleep anyway. Also, because he’s a dad, and that’s what dads do.

‘Do I still have asthma?’ Henry wants to know.

‘Sure, you do. It just doesn’t bother you so much anymore. And you’re big enough to use your inhaler,’ Holland tells him.

‘Look, here’s what I think. Since you don’t think of asthma as a problem so much anymore, doesn’t that mean that you can say you’ve overcome it?’

Henry thinks about that for a moment.

‘Good,’ he says. ‘That’s honest.’

Henry gets up, fishes around in his backpack for pencil and paper, and sits down at the table to write, in his best second-grader purple prose, a story about his many nights in scary emergency rooms and how he has come to accept and live with asthma. It is really something the way he weaves it all together.

Six weeks later, Henry brings home a letter from school telling Sandra and Holland that he has won first place in his age group, statewide, for his essay, *Asthma and Me: Overcoming Adversity and Learning to Breathe Free*. To Holland’s disappointment, the story makes no mention of him, who after all, put the whole thing together.

The letter from school lists all the other winners by grade. There is Amber, the leukemia girl; Jason, the Down Syndrome kid who has dictated his essay to his mother; Robert, the kid with one foot; Malik, the spina bifida kid; Josette, who is blind; and a few others plus Henry, the kid who has outgrown asthma. In terms of degree of difficulty it isn’t even close, as Holland sees it.

Holland is disgusted.

Some way to celebrate Dr. King, he grumbles. ‘Kids competing to see who has had a shittier life for tickets to a ballgame. It’s the lowest common denominator race to the bottom, for chrissake!’

Sandra isn’t having any of it.

‘That’s the very definition of discriminating mind, Holland,’ Sandra says. ‘You need to turn that around.’

Sandra is ecstatic about the Jumbotron. For two months she tells everyone she can think of—in person, over the phone, on Facebook, Instagram, everywhere. She keeps pumping up the boys.

‘You’re going to be on the Jumbotron!’ She tells them at least once a day.

Henry couldn’t care less about a baseball game. By the second grade, he had already decided that he disliked sports in general, and baseball, in particular. But the Jumbotron, that is a whole different story. Henry’s younger brother Tank is four and knows nothing about baseball, but he is also very excited about that really big TV screen.

The day of the game it dumps snow. A real Colorado spring blizzard.

Sandra’s entire understanding of team sports is based on her family’s fanatical identification with Nebraska football. Nebraska has no professional sports teams, so University of Nebraska Lincoln football games are the only show in town. Season tickets for the UNL Cornhuskers are passed down through families of alumni for generations. Out on the windswept prairie, Nebraska plays football in any freezing, rain-drenched, godforsaken weather.

Sandra insists that something will happen, and the game will go on as scheduled.

‘Isn’t the field heated or something? Can’t they just plow it off?’ she asks. ‘How is baseball any different from football?’

‘No one is going to go out and try to hit a hundred-and-ten-mile-an-hour fastball in twenty-eight-degree weather.’

They argue, but Sandra is undeterred. There is nothing more Holland can say.

The Dickerson family does not own a lot of sensible winter wear. They live in Colorado, but they don’t do the mountain thing so much. Holland sometimes feels bad that he did not spend more time outdoors with the boys growing up, but he had been trying to be a writer and Sandra is

a perpetual college student, so money for skiing and camping gear had never really been part of the budget. Plus, Sandra is from the Midwest, and Holland grew up in New England near the water. The Dickersons were a beach family.

Holland's father Jack would say, 'Why in God's name would I want to get into a car with two smelly kids and drive three hours to fucking Vermont to freeze my ass off sliding down a hill with all those other crazy bastards? I can drink just as easily on the beach, for chrissake.' He drove the family to Florida instead.

Sandra bundles up the boys in layers of sweaters and scarves and mittens and funny hats. Holland thinks they look like Nordic trolls. Sandra is so excited. She keeps telling the boys what fun they are all going to have. With the entire family leaning forward expectantly, Holland drives into town squinting into the whiteout snow.

Downtown is deserted except for a few snowplows. It is freezing. A troupe of cross-country skiers glide by in front of them at a red light at 23rd and Market Street. There are no other cars—no one else is stupid enough to drive anywhere unless they absolutely have to. Holland parks in front of the stadium offices, gets out, and bangs on the main door, hoping to prove to Sandra that there is no one there.

Right away, a fresh-faced young man with pale skin and slicked down hair appears. He is wearing gray flannel pants, a blue blazer with the Rockies emblem on the pocket, and a black-and-purple striped tie.

He stares through the glass as if trying to decide if Holland might be dangerous, and yells through the doors,

'THERE'S NO GAME TODAY, SIR!'

He must think I am deranged,' thinks Holland. He tries to explain about the contest, about Martin Luther King, about overcoming horrible childhood difficulties, the complimentary tickets, the Jumbotron, all of it.

'IT'S STATEWIDE!' he hollers, doing his very best to sound like a responsible, caring father.

The young man cocks his ear to the door.

'YES, SIR. BUT THERE'S NO *GAME!*'

Holland sees that his name tag says Gerald.

'WELL, GERALD, COULD WE JUST COME IN FOR A MOMENT AND WARM UP?'

Sandra and the boys sit in the cold car peering out at Holland and Gerald through foggy windows. Holland gestures for them all to come along while Gerald reluctantly unlocks the doors. Slipping and sliding across the windy pavement, everyone trundles in. Holland introduces himself.

'Gerald, is it? I'm Holland,' he says, putting out his hand.

Once inside, Holland watches the boys struggle to make sense of the situation, soaked through and dripping snow on the bright purple carpet. Sandra is wearing a look of mild panic as she moves effortlessly into her make-the-best-of-it-mom mode, ushering the boys around the room, pointing out various bits of baseball memorabilia and reading to Tank the captions of the old, sepia photographs on the walls.

Sizing up the situation, Holland decides to play his older, white guy card. He pulls Gerald aside.

'Listen, Gerald,' he begins, glancing meaningfully over his shoulder at his family. 'So, now that we're here...bviously there's no game...but now that we're here, for winning this

overcoming hardship contest, you know...school kids with all sorts of life-threatening illnesses, leukemia, SARS, AIDS, congenital birth defects, genocide, fratricide, you know, all of that..."

Holland is laying it on. He mentions Martin Luther King. Maybe he mentions terminal cancer. He does not mention asthma.

'So, Gerald, my sons, my wife, we're all here together today, and...well...the truth is, we may not ever make it back here as a family again, you know what I mean?'

Technically, this is a true statement, because, except for Holland, everyone else in his family hates baseball, and the chances that the Dickersons will ever be back there again as one group are slim to none. Holland pauses for effect, to let his words sink in.

'I know you know everyone loves baseball,' he adds for good measure. Again, this is a reasonably true statement, if debatable.

Holland looks at Gerald. He senses he is getting to him.

It is critical to Holland, when going over this story in his mind, that he does not specifically tell Gerald that his son is going to die. Holland prefers to let Gerald think whatever he wants to think and come to his own conclusions. Does he outright lie to Gerald? No, he does not. Was this the worst lie of omission Holland ever told? Not even close.

'I swear to God this is exactly what I said. No more, no less,' he says, whenever he tells this tale.

Henry had rejected the broken arm story because he couldn't remember the closing of the car door part and so he didn't think it qualified. He had gone with the asthma thing, wanting to tell an honest tale. As a parent, Holland is proud of him for that.

But as far as telling the truth is concerned, to Holland, children are one thing, and adults are another.

‘Any fool can tell the truth—it’s already laid out’ Holland likes to tell himself. It’s one of his mantras. ‘Where’s the creativity in that?’ In his mind, everything Holland does that day is in the service of the common good, and no one is going to get hurt, which counts for a lot, in Holland’s world.

Also, Holland has a plan.

‘So, Gerald, is there, maybe, a big picture window, or something like that, where we can all, you know, look out at the field, just so the boys have something to remember?’ Holland asks, letting his voice quaver just a bit.

Gerald’s eyes begin to moisten. ‘Sir, I can do so much better than that!’ he says with true feeling.

‘Come with me!’

He brings them to the elevator that takes them down to the tunnel leading out to the field.

‘Is this the way to the Jumbotron?’ asks Tank.

‘Not exactly,’ Holland tells him.

‘There’s not going to be any Jumbotron, Tank,’ says Henry.

‘Oh,’ says Tank.

When we get to the locker rooms, Gerald ducks through the door and then reappears holding out two brand new baseballs, one in each hand.

‘Who loves baseball?’ he asks cheerily, offering the balls. The boys manage polite thanks, but Holland is thinking, ‘Cool! Free baseballs!’ Then Gerald produces a bucket of Bubblicious bubblegum, and the boys start stuffing their pockets. Holland knows Sandra is dying to say something about dental hygiene and tooth decay, but for once she keeps her thoughts to herself.

Holland turns around and continues down the tunnel.

‘Come on, everyone, we need to get a photo!’

Tank is finally catching on.

‘There’s no Jumbotron today, Dad!’ he calls out in earnest.

‘DAD! THERE’S NO *GAME!*’ Henry yells, in his best you’re-embarrassing-me-now voice.

‘I know that, Henry, but I drove you all down here and we’re getting a damn picture! Come on!’

Gerald catches up and opens the door out onto the field. Sandra and the boys dutifully pose with Holland as One Big Happy Family and Gerald takes their picture. Holland still has the photo on his phone. Everyone is looking cold and confused, standing in four inches of snow in their makeshift winter wear, except for Holland. Holland is grinning like a fool.

‘Let’s go, Holland! This is ridiculous,’ Sandra says.

‘Come on, Dad, it’s cold, let’s go in!’ whines Henry.

Tank blows a small pink bubble and lets it pop with a satisfying crack.

‘Just a minute,’ Holland says. ‘You go ahead.’

Sandra collects the boys in her arms and herds them back toward the tunnel. Tank turns at the last minute and looks at Holland as if to say, ‘What are you, nuts?’ but Holland just smiles, not really sure he isn’t. Sandra grabs their hands as Holland watches his little family scurry back inside and shut the door behind them.

Holland turns around slowly and walks out to the first-base line. Looking up and out into the sparkling stadium bowl softly lit by the urban, apricot sky. In the middle of a city of seven-hundred-thousand people, Holland hears the glad sound of boundless ice crystals, swirling down,

shimmering in silver space, tinkling gently to the ground. All around him, puffy, white snow-pillows cushion fifty-thousand, four-hundred and fifty-five seats—perfect squares, peaceful and undisturbed.

Has anyone else ever seen such a thing as this?

Holland feels at once both alone and part of an infinite whole. Cradled in the arms of a benevolent universe, he believes for an instant he can be someone good, honest and true, loving and kind. He looks up through the glittering air at the massive Jumbotron and imagines he sees his children waving down at him.