

The Shooting Star of Metanville

by Denali Pavlich Wheeler

CHILDHOOD

It began with an old photograph, sepia-toned and with a torn top left corner. It rested, frameless, on the fireplace mantle at my grandparents' house. The summer I was eight, a strong breeze through the screen door blew it down and across the carpet where it rested against my crossed legs. I picked it up, and tried to make out the scrawl on the back of the photo but the rip had removed half of the letters. I turned it over and stared at the person on the front. He was wearing a basketball jersey and stood with his back to the camera, his right leg and arm raised, a sepia ball frozen above his fingertips. I didn't know enough about basketball at the time to understand that he was captured mid-layup.

"Grandma," I said, "Who is this?"

She got out of her chair and shuffled towards me. Bending at the waist, she plucked the picture from my fingers, stared at it for a while, and finally said, "Oh, him. That's the greatest athlete to ever come from Metanville, Kansas. You've never seen anyone play like him... I still haven't." She took the photo and walked into the kitchen where she stood behind Grandad reading his paper at the table.

"Well if it's a trading card, you could probably sell it for a lot of money," I said.

She chuckled. "You know how you have some trading cards that you keep just because it's of your favorite player?"

I nodded. "Like my Michael Jordan card."

"Yes, like Michael Jordan. You don't want to sell his card because it's more special to you than your other cards. But this isn't a trading card, hon."

"Then what is it?" I asked.

She leaned over Grandad's shoulder and said, "Why don't you tell your grandson the story of this picture?"

"Huh?" he grunted. "What picture?"

Grandma held the photo in front of the newspaper and Grandad leaned back, adjusting his glasses so that he could see it better. "Oh. That picture." He grinned. "I haven't told you this story yet, Eli? When your dad was a boy, he asked for it every night before he went to bed." I shook my head.

His smile grew. "This man right here," he tapped the picture with his index finger, "was the greatest athlete to ever come from Metanville, where Grandma and I grew up. I like to think that I would have been the best athlete in town if this son of a gun hadn't shown up. The first day of school when we were fifteen, he came to football practice in his white t-shirt and jeans and told our coach that he wanted to play. Well, Coach looked him up and down and said, 'Son, it sure doesn't look like you want to play, or know how to play.' The kid goes, 'I know how to play catch.' Coach laughed right in his face, but the kid just picked up the ball from the grass at his feet and ran to the other end of the field. He threw this beautiful 100-yard pass, I'm telling you the truth. 100 yards, end zone to end zone, and it hit our coach square in the chest. I thought Coach was going to have a heart attack, but he told the kid that he made the team. Watching him play was like listening to the Rat Pack croon. It was easy, it was simple, and if they were better than you, well they deserved it and you were lucky to be in their presence."

"But he's playing basketball in this picture," I pointed out.

"Yes, Eli, he is. He was a darn good basketball player too. That picture was taken by a man from the Kansas City newspaper that came to watch one of our games. They caught wind of the wonder of the 'Shooting Star' during football season, and they couldn't believe the kid played another sport, too. They got the show of their lives. He scored 47 points the game this picture was taken. He made jump shots just as easily as layups, and remember, this was the time before the three-point line. I swear that boy made one-hundred percent of his free throws. He never missed a single one. The college coaches really heard about him after that and began showing up to see him play. Kansas, K State, Oklahoma, Mizzou, Texas, A & M, the Razorbacks, they all came calling. Even UCLA came to a basketball game. They all offered him spots on their teams, and the number of offers grew throughout baseball season, and I swear they tripled the next football season. All those coaches turned Metanville into the biggest little town the state of Kansas had ever seen, and he never seemed to care for any of it. He was polite to the coaches, and always said his please and thank-yous. Sometimes after basketball or baseball games, the football coaches who had come to watch would ask him to go throw the ball around outside the gym, and he would always oblige. Even after playing a whole game, he could go and throw that football to anyone at any distance. The coaches would call for sweeps, traps, hand-offs, long routes, counters, draws. He looked as cool as a cucumber doing it. It was really a beautiful thing."

I thought about it. "Why did you call him the Shooting Star?"

Grandad sighed and said, "One day he was there and he brought everyone to Metanville and created this big spectacle that he didn't seem to care for, and it seemed like the next day he was gone, just like a shooting star. He just disappeared. Never played at any school, went to any school, nothing. No one has ever heard from him or about him since."

"You never tried to find him?"

"Shooting stars are meteorites that get burnt out. If the young man wanted his peace, I figured he should have it. I never wanted to go looking for him."

I thought he looked sort of sad and I wanted to cheer him up. "I'll be the next Shooting Star, Grandad. You'll never have to go looking for me. I'll be better and I won't leave!"

"No you won't, because I won't let you!" He grabbed me and threw me over his shoulder, making both Grandma and me laugh.

I thought of that story at nearly every game and practice after that. The older I got, the less I needed the Shooting Star for motivation and the more I did it all on my own. I remember the first baseball game my freshman year at Owasso High when I was put in to close a game we were losing 8-6. I walked the first three batters that came up to the plate. It was the bottom of the sixth, we were down by two, and there was only one out. I tried taking deep breaths to calm myself but I could feel my head buzzing and knew I wasn't focused. The fences were closing in around me and it seemed like the crowd was right on the baselines. Somehow, I looked right at Grandad sitting in the bleachers, and he winked at me. When I looked back at the batter up at the plate, the fences moved away from me and the crowd noise faded. I struck out the two batters who followed, ending the inning and winning the game 10-8. When Grandad hugged me at the end, he leaned back and said, laughing, "A performance that would make the Shooting Star himself proud." When my name was in the paper the next morning credited with the save, Grandad cut it out and Grandma stuck it on their kitchen fridge.

They kept all the articles and box scores that I was mentioned in, and those were the only newspaper clippings on the fridge until Grandad's obituary joined them over the summer. Grandma, Dad, and my aunts and uncle had written it together. We had been in St. Louis at a club tournament when he died, and Kenzie was crying after one of my games. I hadn't played well and was mad at myself, and told her to shut up and stop being a crybaby. Dad grabbed me around the bicep, his fingers digging into my skin, and walked me towards the car. He leaned down and talked in the low voice that only parents know how to use, whispering, "Eli, Grandad passed away during your game; you know he's been sick for several weeks at home in bed."

Grandma called. I'm really sorry. It's going to be hard on all of us, but please be nice to your sister. She's only eleven."

I didn't cry until we got into the car.

It was so hot at Granddad's funeral; everyone was sticky and uncomfortable. It was my first funeral, besides our guinea pig's burial when I was six, but this was different. Dad cried, and Mom held Kenzie, and I sat too straight, sweating through my suit, ready to leave and sit in front of the fan in my room at home. Granddad wouldn't need me here to remember him; he wouldn't mind me mourning in my own room. At the end of the ceremony, Grandma found me and hugged me. When she let go, she took a piece of paper out of her pocket which she unfolded and held it out to me. It was the picture of the Shooting Star from the mantle.

"Granddad would want you to have this. I don't need it anymore... It was more of his memory than mine, anyway." She placed the picture in my palm and closed my fingers around it, patting my hand when she was done. "Now you have the Shooting Star and Granddad with you, wherever you keep it."

"Thank you Grandma. I love you... and Granddad too." I left it at that, because there was nothing profound I could say.

When we got home, I tore off my suit and took the picture out of the jacket pocket. I decided to put it on the shelf above my desk, where a couple of my medals and trophies sat. I propped it against my YMCA basketball participation trophy from 4th grade, and it didn't move for the next three years as I added more accomplishments to the shelf: trophies from club championships, MVP plaques, certificates for making all-league, and some pictures of playoff games. There was an autographed ball I got signed at a Royals game, newspaper clippings from some of my best games, and folded-up brackets that I had filled out with Owasso as champions every year that we went to state. Senior year was the closest we ever came, but we lost in the finals. I didn't care about the consolation game the next morning, because I wasn't allowed to pitch any more innings. I had already accepted a scholarship to play college ball, a full ride to Galveston College. I put my acceptance letter right next to the picture of the Shooting Star because I had made it farther than he ever did. The picture stayed on my shelf at home when I left for school in August.

COLLEGE

The sun is always out. Throughout fall workouts and even during the spring, my teammates and I throw our bags together at the end of the ninth inning and race to grab beers and lawn chairs before we head to the white expanse of sand along the Gulf Coast. I am 559 miles away from

home and my talent is paying for me to hang out on the beach; Owasso was nowhere near an ocean.

It is late May, the morning of the first round of Texas JuCo playoffs, and I am throwing up in the locker room minutes before game time. My family has made the trip south to watch, so I take four Advil for my hangover before putting on my sunglasses and heading to the field. The sunshine is too bright, but the medicine kicks in an inning before I'm put in for relief. The ball is coming off my glove slow, lazily, dipping not because I throw it that way, but because my fingers aren't right on the laces. Thankfully, we're playing a low-seeded team and I squeeze out a win. At the end of the game, I look at Mom, Dad, and Kenzie in the stands, all three of them wearing Galveston Whitecaps t-shirts.

It is the strangest moment... Seeing them standing behind the backstop is foreign yet familiar. This is the first college game they've been able to make, and it feels like *déjà vu*, my memory flooding with the images of my baseball tournaments across Oklahoma and Texas and California and Nevada, of the hotels and campgrounds we stayed at. I remember the senior game at Owasso, the announcer detailing my accomplishments, all-league, all-state, informing the crowd that I would be continuing my baseball career in Galveston. Mom had a button pinned to her jacket with a picture of me from kindergarten tee-ball inside of it. All of these flashbacks sink in at once, my mind filling with them, the images swimming together in an endless loop of moments that I swear I haven't stopped living.

For the first time since leaving for college, I miss my family. It had been easy to push them out of my mind when they weren't here, but now I am hung over and they are standing in front of me, proud of their son and brother, proud of where I've ended up, and it feels wrong and I wish Grandma and Grandad could be here, but not to see me like this. When I hug Mom, she looks surprised, and it makes me feel even worse. It is all of these memories hitting me at once, and I can't slow the feelings down. I put my arm around Kenzie, and Dad claps me on the back, handing me a sealed envelope. Grandma's slanted cursive spells out my name across the front.

"Since Grandma couldn't make the trip down here, she wanted me to give this to you. I just texted her the final score and all seven of those strikeouts, too"

It makes me feel even worse. "Thanks. Wish she could have come," I manage.

I slide my finger along the flap, trying not to rip the paper inside, and pull out her letter.

Eli, my little Shooting Star –

I asked your dad to give you this after your game, knowing that you will have played a wonderful one. Since the day you began playing tee-ball, Grandad and I enjoyed each and every one of your games, and I know that he's still watching you even though he's not in the stands. I'm sorry I couldn't be there today either, but I figure that now you're a big college boy you don't

need your grandma to come watch you.

It has been such a pleasure seeing how far you've come in baseball. Since Grandad told you about the Shooting Star of Metanville, we knew that you would put your heart and soul into every sport you played; and the drive that you had meant that you would be the best at whatever sport you chose (Grandad always said it would be baseball – he was good at seeing those kinds of things). You've come a long way, hon, and where you are today is proof of all the hard work you have put into this journey. Even without Grandad and me there at your games anymore, we hope you think of the Shooting Star every time you step on the mound and you will be the greatest athlete we've ever seen.

All of our love xoxo,

Grandma (and Grandad too)

I slip the letter into my bag, but I'm thinking about it for the rest of the night, all the way through dinner and even after my family leaves. That picture is the reason I started this, that I've gotten this far, so I guess that's nice but at the same time it irritates me that for so long I worked my butt off to be better than a damn story. Yeah, I've made it farther than the Shooting Star did. But I'm not even sure where he ended up, and maybe it's time to find out.

The night I'm back home for the summer, Dad and I are sitting in lawn chairs in the backyard grass, and I'm thinking of Texas, the beach, my teammates, when I suddenly remember Grandma's letter and the Shooting Star.

"Grandma and Grandad used to tell you the story of the Shooting Star when you were a kid?"

"Yeah they did," he chuckles, "I asked for it every night before I went to bed. I thought the Shooting Star had to have been the greatest legend in the world. You loved that story, too."

"Grandma reminded me of him in the letter she wrote me for the family game. I had forgotten about him for a while, and it made me think of how I started playing baseball so that I could be better than the Shooting Star, and Grandma and Grandad could tell a better story about me."

"Sometimes I wonder if Grandad told you that story just to get you to play," he replies. "I didn't notice that picture until you found it, I never saw it around when I was a kid. The story had kind of died when I grew up since I was the youngest and he had no reason to tell it anymore. Until you found that picture and asked about it." He takes a long drink of soda.

"Dad, you ever wonder what happened to the Shooting Star? I tried to ask Grandad after a tee-ball game once, but he just told me again that he disappeared."

"By the time he told you the story for the first time, I don't even know if he remembered the real story and knew who the Shooting Star really was. That was a long time ago. I think a lot of

it is exaggerated, but it makes a great story for a kid. But if he was real, however good he was, I would get the hell out of that small town, too, if I was a big shot.”

I laugh. “Yeah, or Owasso.”

“Hey, son, it’s a hell of a lot bigger than Metanville, Kansas, that’s for sure.”

Our conversation gets me thinking of Metanville and the school where the Shooting Star went. Sixty years later, I wonder what the town is like. Grandma and Grandad never told me anything about when they left and moved here to Oklahoma. I know that it’s only an hour away and I have plenty of time, so I decide to make the drive and see what kind of town was too small for the Shooting Star.

U.S. Route 169 runs from Tulsa to Kansas City, and cuts directly through Owasso, Oklahoma and Metanville, Kansas. I leave home around noon, and it is the kind of stifling Midwest summer weather that makes me wish for a dust storm just to get the air moving around. No amount of air conditioning can change this type of heat, so I roll all of the windows down in my truck and take off, heading north. Fifteen minutes outside of Owasso, I’m clear of the suburbs and into peaceful farm country, making me appreciate that it’s a windows-rolled-down type of trip. Dead, brown grass along both sides of the road, and I zone out until I notice the huge sign “Now Leaving Oklahoma, Please Come Back!” From the border it’s only a half a mile to Metanville, and I start asking myself, why did I take a day out of my already short summer to come to this tiny little town? What can I find now if Grandma and Grandad never heard from the Shooting Star again? The speed limit drops to 25 as I cross the river and enter city limits. It’s not so much a river as it is a creek, just like Metanville is more town than city. I guess in the middle of nowhere, small things seem a lot bigger than they really are. It’s just after 1:15 and I have plenty of time to spend here trying to find whatever it is I want.

I decide to start at the high school and see if it’s open. I drive along Main Street and see the marquee board proclaiming it was Home of the Mustangs, “Winner of Kansas State Championships since 1939”. I park, and find the front entrance unlocked since it’s mid-June and the secretaries and janitors are still working. The air conditioning cools my sweat as I follow a sign that points me to the gym. The walls are lined with large glass trophy cases, each filled with plaques, banners, signed balls and gloves and rackets. They are arranged by year, a couple of decades grouped into each box. I peer into the most recent one, staring at the trophy of a glove cradling a baseball; its foundation is engraved with “Metanville High School Mustangs, 2010 Kansas 2A Baseball Champions.” What I wouldn’t give to have held a trophy like that. I scan the rest of the cases quickly to see which decades are contained in each. The last case on the left holds the years 1939-1959, and I search for the awards from the time my grandparents were here. I see a football signed and marked as the first playoff football game, 1951. Then there is a

sepia picture of the basketball team, 1954 2A Southeastern League Champions. I scan the names listed at the bottom, matching them with faces on the team. Jim Russell, Grant Davis, Everett Babbitt, Alan Richards – Grandad! Taped against the wall of the case is a 1954 Mustangs Football Roster, and I see Grandad’s name again. I take a picture with my phone of the names on the picture and the roster, hoping one of them will pop up in a search. If the newspaper loved the Shooting Star, hopefully I can find something in microfilm about him.

I wander to the library and start my search with the paper files of the Metanville Post and the Kansas City Dispatch. I don’t get anything more helpful than the trophy case, so I turn on one of the library computers and cross my fingers that a newspaper archive will have something. First, an article from October 1953 in the Metanville Post comes up. It is titled “Star quarterback leads Mustangs to playoffs”. Okay, that has to be the Shooting Star. 1953 would have been Grandad’s sophomore year, the first year they were on the team. The scanned picture is a grainy, black-and-white frame of the quarterback’s arm cocked as he released the ball. I begin reading.

The Metanville High football team will be playing in the post-season this fall for only the second time in school history. The Mustangs qualified for district playoffs after a thrilling 24-21 win over rival Independence High, a miraculous touchdown in the final three seconds clinching the victory. Senior receiver Barry Louis caught the 91-yard pass heaved by the Mustangs’ star quarterback, Alan Richards.

Alan Richards, my Grandad, so this must have been before the Shooting Star started playing. I keep reading.

Richards has garnered plenty of attention for himself and his teammates this fall. Only a sophomore, the standout has heard from colleges including Kansas, K State, Oklahoma, Mizzou, Texas, and Arkansas.

Wow. The other guy must have been really, really good to take Grandad’s quarterback spot and all the attention. I still don’t find anything, so I switch to the archive of the Kansas City Dispatch and look for articles about Metanville’s basketball and baseball teams. I come up with “Richards’ 53 points impresses UCLA coach Wooden,” “Richards throws no-hitter in league opener,” “Mustangs win 2A state title, Richards plays through flu.”

Wait. All of this make Grandad sound like the start athlete of town. There’s no way it could be him, because why wouldn’t he have told me? But this is all the stuff that he used to tell me about. Was Grandad actually the Shooting Star? I leave the library, more confused than when I began and stop at the trophy case. I stare hard at the picture of the ’54 basketball team and at Grandad. He still looked a lot the same, and it’s hard to look at his face and think of not having

him around anymore. I blink away tears to see the number on his jersey. It's three. The same number the Shooting Star is wearing in the picture that sits on my shelf at home.

It's dark when I get outside; I must have spent hours wandering around town and through the high school. In my truck, I try to process everything I've uncovered. Grandad was the Shooting Star, yet neither he nor Grandma told me. He just left Metanville; didn't take any of the offers he was given, moved away. So why did he just disappear, burning out like the Shooting Star that he called himself? I'm turning this over in my head when the entire sky lights up, temporarily blinding me. As my eyes adjust, I see the tall towers of light on the baseball field next to the school. They surround the diamond illuminating the dirt and grass where players in green and white Mustangs Baseball t-shirts are walking through the dugout. They toss the ball to one another casually, joking around, and I realize that it must be the school team having summer practice. They begin warm-ups, and I see that the team is actually really good. I get out of my truck and walk towards the field. I figure watching from the bleachers can't hurt, and I'm watching intently when the coach comes over to the fence, interrupting my gaze.

"Son, can I help you?" He is old. Like pretty damn old, with a huge mustache that covers his upper lip, his stomach sticking out against his shirt and his hat jammed down on his bald head, turned backwards.

"No. No," I stammer. "I just saw the lights come on and came over to here to watch."

"Does that say Galveston? Do you play?" he asks.

"Huh?" Oh. I'm wearing my warm-up t-shirt. "Yeah, I do, at Galveston College. I pitch. I was in the area and it's hard to stay away from anything baseball; I'm Eli Richards, I say."

He laughs. "If you're a college ballplayer, come on out here. We could always use a college boy to intimidate the guys into working a little harder. Come on, get out on that mound and show me what a college two-seamer looks like."

I hesitate but walk through the dugout anyway, feeling the team's stares. "Sorry guys, I don't mean to interrupt."

The coach introduces me and I see them relax. "This is Eli. He plays at Galveston College and I thought he could show you boys what hard work can do."

Most of them turn back to their drills, and I walk to the mound and search the bucket for a ball I want. I pick carefully, looking for one that's dirty enough to be broken in but with no ragged laces. The coach orders their catcher to get in his crouch for me, and he obeys. He rolls his eyes

at me before pulling down his mask, but I just close my eyes, get in to my windup and throw. It's a decent fastball, hard and straight, and it thwacks against the catcher's glove. He tosses it back and I take another couple of easy pitches before I go for a curveball. The ball is coming off my glove singing, fast and bending as it whizzes into the wide-webbed mitt. A couple of the guys scattered around the infield turn to watch. I do it over and over again. The ball thwacks into the catcher's mitt. Now they're all watching.

The coach stands next to the catcher and puts his hand up, signaling for me to stop. "See that, boys? Think you can get a piece of a pitch like that? Line 'em up."

The team grabs helmets and bats from the dugout and coach comes up to the mound with me. "Richards, you said?"

I nod.

"There's only one other person I've ever seen with a curve like that; his last name was Richards too, Alan Richards."

The ball drops out of my glove.