

## Big Fan

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Tom Monroe is sitting up in bed when I enter the room. He is one of those kids who is great evidence for Mendelian genetics; a perfect 50/50 blend of his parents' features. Mom's freckles and ski-jump nose, Dad's bright blue eyes. The room is filled with mid-afternoon sunlight and painted in cheerful primary colors that make the beeping monitors and bulky hospital bed look slightly out of place.

Tom has been admitted to UPMC Children's Hospital showing early signs of rejecting the kidney transplant he received two years ago. His family drove from out of state, and when I meet them the day after his admission, it is clear that they are tired from the trip. His mother is napping on a little vinyl couch by Tom's bed, but she rises to shake my hand, demonstrating the midwestern politeness I've been warned of.

Although in bed, Tom is fully dressed in basketball shorts and a T-shirt. He has a serious face, and heavy-duty braces with rubber bands. He is very earnest and matter-of-fact, especially for a fourteen year old. When I ask what his least favorite part of being in the hospital was, he tells me it was when they put a needle in his neck. He tells me his illness is something that "just happened". "It isn't anything I did wrong or anything I could have done differently", he adds, clearly repeating something he himself has been told many times.

He is a self-described sports fanatic, and plays soccer, basketball, and baseball. He doesn't like music, movies, or reading, and doesn't watch TV--except for games. He wants to be a sports broadcaster. After fruitlessly searching for something other than sports that interests him, I begin to lose confidence in my ability to find common ground. My knowledge of sports is limited to the kind of information you absorb involuntarily as a result of speaking to people and going online. As far as I'm concerned, the most exciting moment in sports history was when Steph Curry's adorable baby daughter interrupted his postgame press conference.

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“What about video games?” I offer, in a last ditch attempt to steer the conversation into more familiar territory. “Just Madden” he says. “It’s sports.” I decide to give up the common ground strategy altogether, and treat this as an opportunity to learn something. “Why do you love sports?”

Tom brightens at the question. Suddenly eloquent, he says “It’s the pain of a loss, or the thrill of a victory”. “My home hockey team is going to the playoffs this year for the first time in seven years” he tells me. “When I found out, it was New Years, and I ran outside and jumped into a snow drift!”. “Why?!” I ask him. “I was just so happy I didn’t know what else to do...on tv they jump up on tables, but I couldn’t do that, so...”. We both laugh at this.

We talk about sports for the remainder of the hour. Tom becomes animated, and sometimes the IV tubing in his arm catches on the bed as he gesticulates, but he doesn’t seem to notice. He tells me about his favorite basketball team, a “bad team but fun to watch”. He tells me about the upcoming Transplant Games, an Olympics style tournament where recipients and living donors are divided into teams by state and age, and compete in different events. “The medals are real”, he says reverently.

Before I leave, I decide to venture one more non-sports related question. I ask Tom if he thinks he’ll feel a special connection to the other kids at the Transplant Games, because of their shared experience. He pauses, considering. “Probably at first that’s what we’ll talk about, because it’s the obvious thing we have in common” he muses. “But once we get to know each other, I bet we’ll have a lot more to say.”