

Baseball, Manhood, and Fathering Gay Children in Tom Perrotta's "The Smile on Happy Chang's Face"

By Ibis Gomez-Vega*

Played out on a baseball field, Tom Perrotta's "The Smile on Happy Chang's Face" is about two men who behave badly for different reasons. Chang, a Chinese father who comes to the stadium to watch his daughter play softball, behaves badly when he rushes across a baseball field to defend his daughter who has been hit on purpose by a bean ball. He is brutalized by the police and arrested for his behavior. Jack, an upper-middle class white man, behaves badly at home when he slaps his teenage son for saying something that offends him, but the slap is followed by a punch so hard that he breaks his son's nose. This leads his wife to leave him and take the children with her, which causes Jack to feel like a victim alone in his own home without his family. The story opens after Jack has been alone for a year during which he claims to have learned a few things about himself. What the reader learns about Jack through his performance as the umpire in a Little League game is that he is in fact homophobic, probably racist, and a little too infatuated with the bodies of twelve-year-old girls. He sees himself as a victim, a man whose very existence is threatened by people like a next door neighbor who has fathered three "normal" sons, the wife who leaves him and takes "his" children with her, and the effeminate son who no longer wants to associate with his father. At the end of the story, Jack still does not know that he should blame his heteronormative way of seeing the world for all of his problems instead of his wife or his son.

Jack, the narrator in Tom Perrotta's "The Smile in Happy Chang's Face", is a man who behaves badly when he finds out that his son is gay. Because he slaps and punches his son during an argument, his wife Jeanie leaves him, takes the children with her, and "slaps" a restraining order on him that leaves him with "severely restricted" visitation rights.¹ His two daughters can visit him, but they are "not allowed to stay overnight".² His son Jason no longer even bothers to visit and asks him not to attend his performances in the school play. Jack, however, claims that "a year on my own had given me a lot of time to think, to come to terms with what had happened, and to accept my own responsibility for it," but he apparently also finds time "to indulge in the conviction that I was a victim too" because he cannot understand his wife's behavior. He complains that, "as far as

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1. Tom Perrotta, "The Smile on Happy Chang's Face," in *The Best American Short Stories 2005* (ed.) Michael Chabon, 15 (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

2. Ibid.

Jeanie was concerned, I'd crossed some unforgivable line".³ Through Jack's confusion about the seriousness of his crime and the severity of his punishment, the story questions whether Jack has really learned something about himself during his year spent alone, whether he is a victim, as he claims that he is, and whether his punishment, losing his family over a slap in the face, is appropriate to his crime, his inability to accept his son. However, Jack's discomfort with his son's sexuality is not the only problem evident through his narrative. As he attempts to prove something about himself during that punitive year spent alone, Jack also reveals a propensity for ogling little girls and judging them harshly through his heteronormative way of seeing the world, part of his very narrow minded opinions on people who are the "Other," who in this case happen to be his feminine son Jason, little girls who play baseball, and Happy Chang.

As a foil to Jack, Perrotta creates Happy Chang, a Chinese American father whose daughter may or may not be gay, but a man who may be dealing with some of the same discomfort that Jack deals with. However, when the time comes for Happy Chang to choose heteronormativity over his daughter, he chooses his daughter without hesitation. With these two men, Perrotta overtly contrasts Jack's behavior toward his son and Happy Chang's behavior toward his daughter, the gender bending star pitcher of the Ravens. When an opposing pitcher hits Lori with a bean ball on the head, Happy Chang runs through the field to defend his daughter. He does not stop to ask himself if his daughter deserves to get hit by a bean ball because she is playing a game with boys and getting hit by bean balls is what happens to girls who transgress gender lines and play with boys. He does not even question the appropriateness of Lori pitching for a boy's team. Instead, he runs to the spot where his daughter is hit by the ball and attacks the coach who made the decision to hit his daughter. His behavior causes a disruption, and he is arrested, but the moment of Happy Chang's arrest rattles Jack's sense of security, his secret awareness that he is always right.

Happy Chang's arrest reminds Jack of his own arrest a year earlier, which brings back the memory of his bad behavior, but he also sees in Happy Chang's smile something that he has been searching for since the day of his arrest, the justification for having done the right thing. When Happy Chang runs across the field to stand up for his daughter, the policemen who arrest him also manhandle him. Jack notices but says nothing. He is at that particular moment more concerned with Lori, who is lying unconscious on the ground, but the behavior of the two policemen stays with him, as does the fact that Happy Chang gets up from the dirt with a smile on his face. The smile on Happy Chang's face has a direct effect on Jack, a man who has never really taken responsibility for his own actions and

3. Ibid.

has in fact begun to think about himself as a victim of his wife's schemes. In this story, two men behave badly for very different reasons, and Tom Perrotta uses this comparison, the difference in their behavior, to comment on the privilege that white men take for granted and the lessons that these same men have yet to learn about themselves in the baseball fields where their lives play out.

"The Smile on Happy Chang's Face" was originally published in *Post Road* in 2005, and it then appeared in a collection when Michael Chabon picked it for *The Best American Short Stories 2005*. In 2013, Tom Perrotta included it in *Nine Inches*, a title that, according to Matthew Gilbert in his review for *The Boston Globe*, "refers to the distance that chaperones at a middle-school soiree must enforce between kids on the dance floor" but can also refer to "the obvious penis-size joke,"⁴ a point that scholars who write about Tom Perrotta's work find valuable because many of Perrotta's novels deal with the issue of masculinity in America. The story achieved local prominence when it was chosen for the One City One Story program of the Boston Book Festival in October of 2010, a selection that produced a flurry of newspaper reviews as thousands of copies were distributed free of charge in Boston. Thus, this short story has been reviewed three times, when it was first included in *The Best American Short Stories 2005*, when it was chosen for the Boston One City One Story program in 2010, and then again when it appeared in *Nine Inches* in 2013.

Jason Sanford,⁵ reviewing *The Best American Short Stories 2005* for *Story South*, calls "The Smile on Happy Chang's Face" the "best sports story to be written in recent years," but he defends Jack when he claims that "the umpire (who is also the narrator of the story) is a good man and, during the course of the game, relives the mess he's made of his life in recent years." In 2010, Carlo Rotella,⁶ in "Binding Boston with a Story," points out that "the story explores the inner turmoil of the home plate umpire, Jack, whose family has fallen apart," and he adds that Jack is "fumbling toward greater self-knowledge and tolerance." Rotella⁷ rightly points out that "Jack's baffled, hurt, defensive, querulous, honest voice gives the story its vitality." Shannon Fischer, writing for *Boston Magazine*, states simply that the story "hits the ground on issues such as domestic abuse, homophobia, and the tendency of otherwise-mellow suburban parents to brawl at their kids' games."⁸

4. Matthew Gilbert, *Nine Inches by Tom Perrotta* (Boston Globe, 7 September 2013).

5. Jason Sanford, *Story of the Week: 'The Smile on Happy Chang's Face.'*

6. Carlo Rotella, "Binding Boston with a Story." *Rev. of "The Smile on Happy Chang's Face"* (Boston.com, 30 August 2010).

7. *Ibid.*

8. Shannon Fischer, *Person of Interest: Tom Perrotta* (Boston Magazine, October 2010).

In 2013, Alix Ohlin,⁹ reviewing *Nine Inches* for *The New York Times*, also mentions Jack's voice when he claims that it is "Dockers-casual, affable and self-deprecating." He points out that "a recurring element in the stories is the wrong move a character makes—blowing off college applications, committing adultery—that turns an Edenic life into a postlapsarian hell," and he claims that, for the characters in these stories, this "recurring element" works as the equivalent of losing "their place in the social order of their hometown." Ohlin¹⁰ refers to the "carefully seeded moment of ugliness," like Jack's violence against his son, to argue that "Perrotta uses it to show how ordinary life contains both sweetness and violence," but he also notices that Jack "can't entirely grasp how everything went wrong, much less articulate it to his family." Matthew Gilbert points out in his review for *The Boston Globe* that Perrotta "has been the literary chronicler of suburban angst" and adds that "PerrottaWorld is a pretty place, but the sharp corners of despair keep breaking through the veneer of forced optimism and quaint architecture."¹¹ Gilbert claims that the best story in *Nine Inches* is "The Smile on Happy Chang's Face," a story "in which a Little League umpire is haunted by the moment when he struck his young gay son. He's the archetypal old-school male locked in a cycle of shame, remorse, and denial."¹² What these early newspaper reviewers note is that the story deals with the arbitrary measures that separate people, like the arbitrary nine inches that separate dancers, but the story also emphasizes, by the mere allusion to those nine inches in the book's title, the cost of measuring masculinity in America.

The main action of the story takes place on the baseball field during the Little League championship game between the Wildcats and the Ravens, a game officiated by Jack as home-plate umpire. Thus, the image of masculinity in baseball works as a backdrop for some of the statements made by Perrotta, even though this particular game features a Chinese American girl pitcher, Lori Chang, instead of a more traditional American boy, which is one of the many twists created by Perrotta in a story that examines what men like Jack value and how those values are constructed. Baseball functions as a symbol, one probably overused in literature and film, but nevertheless strangely appropriate in this story about boys and girls who break with "traditional" roles and the fathers who must then struggle with their own feelings about their children's trailblazing defiance. In "A Fit for a Fractured Society," John Thorn points out that baseball has become "the great repository of national ideals, the symbol of all that [is] good in American life: fair play (sportsmanship); the rule of law (objective arbitration of disputes); equal opportunity (each side has

9. Alix Ohlin, *Nine Inches, Stories by Tom Perrotta* (The New York Times, 13 September 2013).

10. Ibid.

11. Gilbert, *Nine Inches by Tom Perrotta*, 2013.

12. Ibid.

its innings); the brotherhood of man (bleacher harmony)".¹³ In this story, all of these values will be challenged. Focusing on one man who loves baseball and functions as an umpire on the field, Perrotta uses the baseball field with its concomitant values as the canvas on which Jack's understanding of what it means to be a man is challenged because, to his surprise and even pleasure, the best pitcher on the Ravens' team is a girl whom Jack finds "adorable," but other men see as a threat.

Lori Chang's presence on the field is a source of contention from the very beginning of the story. Carl DiSalvo, Jack's next door neighbor and the coach of the Wildcat Players, warns Jack before the game begins that "'the strike zone's down here. Not up here,'" and "he illustrates his point by slicing imaginary lines across his stomach and throat".¹⁴ Carl thinks that Jack favors Lori, especially when Jack reminds him that the kids on his team have a reason to be "wound tight" (2005: 3) about the game, especially "after what Lori did to them last time. Didn't she set some kind of league record for strikeouts?".¹⁵ As soon as the game begins and Lori demonstrates that she is pitching "at the top of her game",¹⁶ Carl begins his practice of running out to scream at the umpire, what Jack considers "theatrics".¹⁷ Later, when Lori throws "a guided missile that thudded into [the batter's] leg with a muffled whump," Carl insists that "she threw it right at him" and calls it a "bean ball",¹⁸ which is a ball thrown to cause harm and is usually thrown at the head, not the leg. Carl immediately demands that the umpire do something about the transgressing girl pitcher, but Jack refuses to eject Lori from the game. Ray Santelli, the Ravens' manager, "cupped his hands around his mouth and called out, 'Hey, Lori, did you hit that kid on purpose?'" but "Lori seemed shocked by the question" and responds by saying, "'It slipped'".¹⁹ After the inning is over, "on her way to the dugout she stopped and apologized to Trevor Mancini, resting her hand tenderly on his shoulder." Jack sees this as "a classy move," and he notices that "Trevor blushed and told her to forget about it".²⁰ Carl however does not forget. The incident causes a heated argument between the coaches, managers, and umpires on the field as Carl attempts to get Lori thrown out of the game.

13. Robert Elias, "A Fit for a Fractured Society," in *Baseball and the American Dream* (ed.) Robert Elias, 3-33 (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), 3.

14. Perrotta, "The Smile on Happy Chang's Face," 2005, 4.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid, 5.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid, 11.

19. Ibid, 12.

20. Ibid, 13.

Issues of race and the white man's discomfort with race lurk in the background of Perrotta's story. The most obvious theme in "The Smile on Happy Chang's Face" appears to be Jack's unease with his son's sexuality, but race lurks in the subtext as an issue because Lori is a Chinese American girl and because the smile on her Chinese father's face apparently teaches Jack something about himself. The white men in this story get to argue about whether Lori should stay in the game or not, but Lori's father, Happy Chang, is not allowed to voice his opinion on his daughter's love of baseball. He is not only silent but he is also presented as "a grim, unfriendly man who wore the same dirty beige windbreaker no matter how hot or cold it was and always seemed to need a shave".²¹ According to Jack, Happy Chang was "unlike the other Asian fathers in our town" who are "doctors, computer scientists, and businessmen who played golf and made small talk in perfect English",²² men who have somehow blended into the culture that surrounds them. The doctors, computer scientists, and businessmen do not stand out, but Happy Chang has "a rough edge, a just-off-the-boat quality".²³ He is not only ignorant of baseball etiquette but he is also from the wrong social class, which almost labels him as an outsider in the stadium where his daughter plays the game as well as any American boy. Although he comes to the games to watch his daughter pitch, he sits on the wrong side of the field, "in the third-base bleachers, surrounded by Wildcats fans",²⁴ as if he does not know which side is which. Jack wonders why Happy Chang "faithfully attended [his daughter's] games but always sat scowling on the wrong side of the field, as if he were rooting for her opponents," but he also asks himself if Happy Chang's "daughter was as unfathomable to him as my own son had been to me".²⁵ These two men are very different, but they are also fathers of children who challenge heteronormative rules of behavior. Perrotta uses their similarities and their differences to argue that Jack is not as right as he thinks he is.

As an American male who knows everything there is to be known about baseball, Jack obviously notices that Happy Chang sits on the "wrong" side of the stadium because, to men like Jack, there is a wrong side and a right side to something as simple as watching a baseball game; he adds Happy Chang's *faux pas* to the many other things that define Happy Chang for him, like his class, his looks, and his inability to speak English. What Jack does not notice is that Happy Chang comes to the games to cheer for his daughter, albeit in silence, but the fact of the matter is that he comes. He does not socialize or emote; in fact, he does not even speak in the

21. Ibid, 8.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid, 9.

story until his daughter gets hit by a bean ball thrown, on purpose, by one of Carl's sons; at that point, Happy Chang climbs the fence, rushes across the field to his daughter's side, and attacks Carl just as Carl's son, Ricky, screams at his father, "You shouldn't have made me do that!".²⁶ Perrotta stresses the difference between the white males involved in this game and the tiny Chinese man who steps up to defend his daughter when he states that "Happy Chang is a small man, no bigger than some of our Little Leaguers, and Carl is tall and bulked up from years of religious weightlifting",²⁷ but Happy Chang attacks him nevertheless. The Chinese father may not speak English well enough to impress Jack, but he knows what happens on the field. He knows that the pitcher, the boy who threw the ball, hits Lori because the coach tells him to throw the ball at her, and Happy Chang attacks the man, not the boy. When Jack looks away from Lori on the ground, he sees that "Happy's straddling Carl's chest and punching him repeatedly in the face, all the while shouting what must be very angry things in Chinese".²⁸ Carl is so surprised that he "does not even try to defend himself, not even when Happy Chang reaches for his throat".²⁹ Happy Chang rushes to the field to protect his daughter, not to beat up a child. He may not know where to sit, but he does know how to take care of his own. Unlike Jack, Happy Chang knows the difference between right and wrong, between hitting an adult and hitting a child.

Happy Chang's just-off-the-boat quality sharply contrasts with Jack's sense of being just right. Jack is an American man on the baseball field, and he knows exactly where people should sit. At home, when he measured himself against his son, he could claim an empowering sense of heterosexual "normalcy." On the field, Jack serves as the home-plate umpire, a position of authority that belies the mess that his life has become in the year since he slapped and then punched his son. Perrotta uses the differences between these two men to comment on racial inequality in America. Some men are clearly more entitled to their manhood than others. Jack even notices the difference between him and Happy Chang in the way the policemen "take Happy Chang into custody with a surprising amount of force".³⁰ Jack sees Officer "Freylinghausen grinding" Happy Chang's "face into the dirt while Hughes slaps on the cuffs," and he adds that, a year earlier, when Jack slaps and punches his effeminate son, the exact same policemen "were oddly polite" with him.³¹ Happy Chang is humiliated in public as he comes to his daughter's defense. He is arrested so quickly

26. Ibid, 14.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid, 15.

31. Ibid.

that he is not even allowed to approach his daughter as she lies on the ground unconscious, which suggests that the police officers have no sympathy for the father whose daughter has been hurt. For what may be the first time in his life, Jack notices the difference in the way the police officers treat him and Happy Chang, which could be a good thing, but he does not even notice that the police does not allow the Chinese father to comfort his daughter or to even find out what happens to her. Happy Chang is taken away before Lori recovers, so the poor father has no way of knowing what happens to his daughter. What Jack sees on the field leads the reader to hope for a moment of awareness about the treatment of minority people in America, but that is not to be. Although he claims that he has changed in the year that he has spent alone, he is still clueless about race relations, but the look on Happy Chang's face stays with Jack through the rest of the story, even though Jack appears to misread its meaning.

The link between Happy Chang and Jack is Lori Chang, who is introduced as a girl who "didn't even look like an athlete" because "she was petite, with a round, serious face and lustrous hair that she wore in a ponytail threaded through the back of her baseball cap".³² The point of most of Perrotta's description, provided through Jack's narration and therefore through his prejudices, is that, "unlike Allie and Steph, both of whom were fully developed in a chunky, none-too-feminine way",³³ Lori does not look like a lesbian. He says that "Lori was one of only three girls playing in our Little League that season," and he admits that "it's politically incorrect to say so, but the other two, Allie Regan and Steph Murkowski, were tomboys—husky, tough-talking jockettes you could easily imagine playing college rugby and marching in Gay Pride parades later in their lives".³⁴ Unlike Allie and Steph, though, Lori "was lithe and curveless, her chest as flat as a boy's beneath the stretchy fabric of her Ravens jersey," and he adds, asking whether "it's okay for me to talk like this" about a twelve year old girl, that "there was something undeniably sexual about her presence on the baseball field".³⁵

As an adult commenting on Lori's looks, on the fact that she seems to exude femininity and cannot therefore be a lesbian, Jack establishes his intolerance towards people who transgress the boundaries of what he sees as gender prescribed "normalcy." He has adopted what David L. Wallace and Jonathan Alexander refer to as the "just like us" mentality, which means that, by assuming that Lori is just the right kind of girl, a heterosexual girl, he can separate her from "the inaccurate stereotypes of LGBT

32. *Ibid*, 7.

33. *Ibid*.

34. *Ibid*, 6-7.

35. *Ibid*, 7.

people as freaks, perverts, and pedophiles" that he obviously believes to be true.³⁶ He admits that his wife Jeanie had tried to teach him to stop "using words like *sissy* and *wimp*" and "scolded" him "for trying to enforce supposedly outdated standards of masculinity," but he adds that, even though he "tried to get with the program," he was in fact "embarrassed to be seen in public with my own son, as if he somehow made me less of a man".³⁷ There is a connection between Jack's appreciation for Lori and his sense of his own masculinity, but this connection is not entirely clear to him. He is, however, a man who worries about being less of a man when he stands next to his effeminate son, which means that he suffers from what Tim Bergling calls "sissyphobia," "a fear and loathing of men who behave in a 'less manly than desired,' or effeminate, manner".³⁸ Jack's discomfort in his son's company reflects the fear of the "swish," the effeminate male who for many years was singled out for derision even by other homosexuals. In "Unacceptable Mannerisms," Craig M. Loftin traces anti-swish feelings in gay publications between 1945 and 1965, and he finds that even early gay magazines like *One* and *The Mattachine Review* portray the effeminate male or Swish as the wrong kind of gay man and refer to him as "a degrading stereotype, an irritating throwback to an outdated model of homosexual identity".³⁹ Writers for these early gay magazines had something in common with Jack. They also preferred masculine men who love baseball.

Having a Chinese American girl as a star pitcher leads Jack to wonder how her father, Happy, feels about her presence on the baseball field. Because Happy Chang sits "stone faced, as if he wished he were back at his restaurant"⁴⁰ during the games, Jack assumes that Happy Chang is not in fact happy about his daughter's performance in the field. He tells himself that "maybe it's a Chinese thing," this sitting "stone faced" at a baseball game and "watching his amazing daughter dominate the Wildcats in front of the whole town on a lovely summer evening",⁴¹ but he also thinks that maybe Happy Chang "wished he had a son instead of a daughter".⁴² This leads him to think of all the stories he has heard about how Chinese parents prefer sons to

36. David L. Wallace, and Jonathan Alexander, "Queer Rhetorical Agency: Questioning Narratives of Heteronormativity," *JAC: A Journal of Rhetoric, Culture, & Politics* 29, no. 4 (2009): 794.

37. Perrotta, "The Smile on Happy Chang's Face," 2005, 9.

38. Tim Bergling, *Sissyphobia: Gay Men and Effeminate Behavior* (New York: Southern Tier Editions/Haworth Press, 2001), 3-4.

39. Craig M. Loftin, "Unacceptable Mannerisms: Gender Anxieties, Homosexual Activism, and Swish in the United States, 1945-1965," *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 3 (2007): 579.

40. Perrotta, "The Smile on Happy Chang's Face," 2005, 8.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

daughters and how the orphanages in China are "full of them".⁴³ With these comments on Happy Chang and what the Chinese prefer, Jack slides into yet another politically incorrect commentary on a group of people about whom he knows very little. He admits that he "had no idea" what he was thinking about in his observations about Happy Chang and the Chinese in general, but he adds that "it didn't keep me from speculating".⁴⁴ He tells himself that, "in China, girls didn't play baseball," as if he actually knew this to be true, and then asks, "what did it mean that Lori played the game as well or better than any American boy?".⁴⁵ If he were an honest man, Jack would face the possibility that Lori could have more in common with Allie and Steph, the dreaded lesbians, than he can imagine. She is after all a girl who loves baseball and who plays it better than most boys, but to think about Lori as a lesbian Jack would have to abandon his belief in what he considers "normal" gender prescribed behaviors.

Questioning what it means to be a man in America has been recognized as a theme in Tom Perrotta's work. In "Bad Mommies and Boy-Men", Charles Hatten not only points to the popularity of contemporary narratives that "problematize traditional male identity"⁴⁶ but also argues that, in *Little Children*, Perrotta returns to the themes "of troubled masculinity and sexual transgression"⁴⁷ that he had previously used in his earlier novel, *Election*. Hatten claims that in *Little Children*, Perrotta provides a "qualified celebration of a reassertion of masculine identity and moral clarity through violence"⁴⁸ and adds that "Todd's failure to live up to masculine ideals of self-control, including sexual self-control, is linked to what has become a stereotypical male incapacity in a postfeminist era, the difficulty of acknowledging and responding to feelings of vulnerability and pain".⁴⁹ This is part of the problem in "The Smile on Happy Chang's Face" where Jack slaps his son out of frustration that his son is not masculine enough. Jason does not like any of the things that his father associates with traditional American masculinity, like baseball and roughhousing. The challenge to American manhood provided by the effeminate son leads the more "traditional" American father to react violently. Through Jack's reaction, Perrotta examines how heterosexual men should react to finding out that their sons are gay or, in the case of

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid, 9.

46. Charles Hatten, "Bad Mommies and Boy-Men: Postfeminism and Reactionary Masculinity in Tom Perrotta's *Little Children*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 48, no. 3 (2007): 231.

47. Ibid, 232.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid, 236.

Happy Chang, a character who barely speaks in this story, the possibility that their daughters could be lesbians.

Jack loses control of his emotions when his son Jason "said something that shocked" him and Jack "slapped him across the face".⁵⁰ The reader is never told what Jason says, but whatever it is offends the father. Jack admits that, "despite the evidence in front of my face, I refused to believe that you could be an American boy and not love baseball and not want to impress your father with your athletic prowess".⁵¹ Jack claims that his son "was the one who threw the first punch, a feeble right cross that landed on the side of my head," and he even admits that "later, when I had time to think about it, I was proud of him for fighting back".⁵² However, as blows are exchanged, Jack states that his son's defiance "made me crazy. I couldn't believe the little faggot had hit me." That the "little faggot" hits him is an insult to his manhood, but he adds that "the punch I threw in return is the one thing in my life I'll regret forever".⁵³ Within the same paragraph in which Jack admits to hitting his son lies a significant contradiction about what actually happened. Jack first claims that his son "said something that shocked me and I slapped him across the face," but the line that follows states that "he was the one who threw the first punch".⁵⁴ Apparently Jack does not consider a slap across the face an act of violence because he tells himself and the reader that his fifteen-year-old son "threw the first punch." The son throws a punch in self-defense after he gets slapped; then, the father punches him back hard enough to break his nose, but the slap is the first violation in this altercation.

Jack's inability to recognize that he may have been at fault suggests that he may be one of those white men whom David Savran considers masochists in the closet, "working-and-lower-middle-class men who believe themselves to be the victims of the scant economic and social progress made in the U. S. over the past thirty years by African Americans, women, and other racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities".⁵⁵ In order to see themselves as victims, as people affected by whatever benefits the "Other," these men have to see themselves "trading places, rhetorically at least, with the people they loath, [and] they imagine themselves (through a kind of psychic prestidigitation) [as] the new persecuted majority".⁵⁶ In "Becoming Rasta," Wendy Somerson explains Savran's logic of the "voluntary victimization" of the white male when she argues

50. Perrotta, "The Smile on Happy Chang's Face," 2005, 10.

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. David Savran, "The Sodomasochist in the Closet: White Masculinity and the Culture of Victimization," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (1996): 128.

56. Ibid.

that, by using the "dual identification" of victim and aggressor explained by Savran through his study of Rambo movies, "the white male subject can both claim victimization and assert his aggressive masculinity through a continual battle that is ultimately waged within himself".⁵⁷ Jack makes no mention that he considers himself persecuted. He is an upper class white man who lives in a wealthy suburb, and he even gets to keep his fancy house when his wife moves out and leaves him alone, so he has not lost his possessions. However, Jack is very conscious that his ideas are being restricted, that some of his thoughts are now "politically incorrect," or simply not the right thing to say or even think. This is evident when he refers to Allie and Steph as lesbians-to-be,⁵⁸ when he speculates on whether the Chinese like girl children,⁵⁹ when he labels Mr. Chang "Happy" simply because he does not smile much, and when he relentlessly harasses his own son by using words like *sissy* and *wimp* in front of him and also uses the word "faggot" to define him.⁶⁰ That he may hold resentment toward minority groups is not even mentioned in the story, but Jack does notice that he cannot think the way he thinks because other people, including his wife, consider his thoughts offensive, and he makes a point of stating very clearly that other men whom he considers less deserving than himself, like his neighbor Carl, have what he has been denied.

One of Jack's statements about himself in the story is that, "like most men, I'd wanted a son who reminded me of myself as a kid, a boy who lived for sports, collected baseball cards, and hung pennants on his bedroom walls".⁶¹ What he gets instead is Jason, "an artistic, dreamy kid with long eyelashes and delicate features",⁶² a son who, at the age of ten "wants to take tap-dancing lessons in a class full of girls," at fourteen makes "the chorus of *Guys and Dolls* and expects [his father] to be happy about this," and at the age of fifteen joins "the Gay and Lesbian Alliance at his progressive suburban high school" where the school will hold "separate" proms for "boys who want to go with boys and girls who want to go with girls".⁶³ Jason is not the kind of boy whom Jack values or even recognizes as a boy. Unfortunately, Jack's neighbor, Carl, "had three normal boys living right next door," and Jack could see them "in the backyard kicking a soccer ball, tossing a football, or beating the crap out

57. Wendy Somerson, "Becoming Rasta: Recentring White Masculinity in the Era of Transnationalism," *The Comparatist* 23 (1999): 129.

58. Perrotta, "The Smile on Happy Chang's Face," 2005, 7.

59. *Ibid.*, 9.

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.*, 10.

of one another".⁶⁴ Carl's boys are "normal" because they do the kinds of things considered normal by men like Jack, who adds that "sometimes they included my son in their games, but it wasn't much fun for any of them".⁶⁵

The concept of normalcy in queer studies refers to what Michael Warner calls "the taken-for-grantedness of dominant sexuality"⁶⁶ in *The Trouble with Normal*. David L. Wallace and Jonathan Alexander, in "Queer Rhetorical Agency: Questioning Narratives of Heterosexuality," explain that "heteronormativity effectively divides people into two distinct categories—homo and hetero—and clearly privileges heterosexuality".⁶⁷ Jack's world is a heteronormal world in which boys behave like the kind of boys whom he recognizes as boys and girls behave like girls whom he recognizes as girls. The problem is that, in his world, he gets to decide what is appropriate behavior for boys and girls. In the case of his son Jason, "normalcy" refers to Jack's expectation that Jason should like baseball. In Lori's case, "normalcy" refers to the fact that Lori is pretty and feminine, but Lori complicates Jack's sense of "normalcy" because, as cute as she is in a very girlie girl sort of way, she is also such a good baseball player that Jack assumes that she "actually had a strategy, a potent combination of control, misdirection, patience, and outright intimidation".⁶⁸ Lori "had not yet reached puberty" and "was lithe and curveless," like a boy, but she can still be identified by Jack as a girl because "there was something undeniably sexual about her presence on the baseball field".⁶⁹ Jack must be able to identify Lori as a girl in his heteronormative world because he likes Lori, and he does not want to consider that she could, like his son, be breaking his gender specific rules and positioning herself as "off limits" to men like him.

Jack's obsession with Lori's heteronormativity is scary. He objectifies Lori on the field, even though he is fully aware that his objectification of a twelve-year-old girl is not "okay," for he asks himself whether "it's okay for me to say this".⁷⁰ He knows that he likes her because she is "a powerhouse on the baseball diamond"⁷¹ but he really likes her because she is a pretty girl; his problem is that, in order to like her, he must first see her as a desirable sex object, as a girl who is not like Steph and Allie and will

64. Ibid, 9.

65. Ibid.

66. Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 7.

67. Wallace, and Alexander, "Queer Rhetorical Agency: Questioning Narratives of Heteronormativity," 2009, 794.

68. Perrotta, "The Smile on Happy Chang's Face," 2005, 7.

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

not be marching in a gay parade, ever. Even though he assumes that Lori must be breaking Chinese cultural values (when he says that "in China, girls didn't play baseball"), he cannot allow himself to think that she is also crossing that other gender specific line that he made on the sand. He does not want to believe that just like Allie and Steph, Lori could be a lesbian. Jack's inability to consider Lori as a possible lesbian is part of his problem; he may like Lori, but he is at heart homophobic, which explains why he reacts so violently to his son's sexual orientation. Cynthia L. Conley, in "Learning about a Child's Gay or Lesbian Sexual Orientation," documents that studies "have overwhelmingly revealed that parents tend to react in a negative fashion"⁷² to learning about their child's sexual orientation, and she adds that "many parents' negative reactions can be categorized as homophobic".⁷³ In a study from 2012, psychologists find that "the majority of parents initially respond to their children's LGB sexual orientation disclosure negatively",⁷⁴ and several mental health practitioners suggest that perhaps coming out to parents may not be such a good idea.

For Jason, the advice from mental health practitioners comes too late. He displays his sexual difference in front of his father, and his father behaves badly. Jack claims that he regrets his behavior toward his son, that punching his son "is the one thing in my life I'll regret forever" because he "broke [Jason's] nose, and Jeanie called the cops",⁷⁵ but Jack's statement lacks clarity; it is difficult to know whether he regrets breaking his son's nose or regrets that his wife called the police and "started divorce proceedings"⁷⁶ the day after he hit Jason. Nevertheless, the direct result is that he loses his wife and children and spends his time "writing letters trying to outline my complicated position on these matters".⁷⁷ He whines that "no one ever responded to"⁷⁸ his letters because Jeanie and the children choose silence on the subject of Jack's behavior, but Jack persists because he believes that his "side of the story had

72. Cynthia L. Conley, "Learning about a Child's Gay or Lesbian Sexual Orientation: Parental Concerns about Societal Rejection, Loss of Loved Ones, and Child Well Being," *Journal of Homosexuality* 58, no. 8 (2011): 1022.

73. *Ibid.*, 1023.

74. Emily F. Rothman, Mairead Sullivan, Susan Keyes, and Ulrike Boehmer, "Parents' Supportive Reactions to Sexual Orientation Disclosure Associated with Better Health: Results from a Population-Based Survey of LGB Adults in Massachusetts," *Journal of Homosexuality* 59, no. 2 (2012): 188.

75. Perrotta, "The Smile on Happy Chang's Face," 2005, 10.

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*, 16.

78. *Ibid.*

disappeared into some kind of void",⁷⁹ and this is what leads him to "the conviction that I was a victim too, every bit as much as my wife and son".⁸⁰

Perrotta does not provide any examples of the letters that Jack writes to defend his position, but at the end of the story he does provide a glimpse into another one of Jack's attempts to influence his family's opinion of him. When Jack finds out that the championship game will be televised, he e-mails his wife and children asking them to watch the game on cable access, and then he leaves a message to remind them to watch the game all the way to the end. What he wants them to see is the statement that he thinks he is making when, at "full count, bases loaded, two out" and "a score of 1-0," Jack relinquishes his authority on the field. The game was "narrowing down to a single pitch," but Jack was so preoccupied "thinking about Happy Chang"⁸¹ that he does not even see the all-important pitch. Instead of paying attention to the game, Jack "was thinking about Happy Chang and everything he must have been going through at the police station, the fingerprinting, the mug shot, the tiny holding cell",⁸² a suggestion that he may be feeling sympathy for the Chinese man who was so rudely treated, but that is too good to be true. When Jack states that "all I could think of just then was the smile on Happy Chang's dirty face as the cops led him off the field",⁸³ he is saying that the look on Happy Chang's face shows "the proud and defiant smile of a man at peace with what he'd done and willing to accept the consequences".⁸⁴

The fact that Happy Chang is "willing to accept the consequences" of his actions puzzles Jack to such an extent that it distracts him away from performing his job as umpire. When "the ball smacked into the catcher's mitt" and wakes Jack from his "reverie," he "honestly didn't know if it was a ball or a strike".⁸⁵ Unable to make the call, Jack quits. He takes off the umpire's mask and the chest protector and walks away. At that moment, he notices that "Mickey Fellner was out of the dugout and videotaping me as I walked past second base and onto the grass. He followed me all the way across center field, until I climbed the fence over the ad for the Prima Ballerina School of Dance and left the ball park".⁸⁶ Then, Jack admits that, "that's what I wanted my ex-wife and children to see." He thinks that his leaving the field shows "an umpire walking away from a baseball game, a man who had the courage to

79. Ibid.

80. Ibid, 15-16.

81. Ibid, 17.

82. Ibid.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid.

85. Ibid.

86. Ibid, 18.

admit that he'd failed, who understood that there were times when you had no right to judge, responsibilities you were no longer qualified to exercise," and he foolishly hopes that "they might learn something new about me, something I hadn't been able to make clear to them in my letters and phone calls".⁸⁷ Reality, however, bears little resemblance to what he remembers of his walk across the baseball field after he refuses to make a decision that would end the game. Even though he remembers his "walk across the outfield as a dignified, silent journey," he admits that, "I look sweaty and confused, a little out of breath as I mumble a string of barely audible excuses and apologies for my strange behavior," and he knows at that point that, "if Jeanie and the kids had been watching, all they would have seen was an unhappy man they already knew too well, fleeing from the latest mess he'd made: just me, still trying to explain".⁸⁸ Unlike Happy Chang, who had a reason to run through the field and strike Carl, Jack has no reason to leave. His walk across the field is not "a dignified, silent journey" but further evidence of his failure.

The question of course is whether Jack has learned anything by this point in his life. When he sees himself on television as the "unhappy man" whom his wife and children "knew too well," he appears to recognize for the first time that he has made a mess and that he is "still trying to explain"⁸⁹ himself and his failures to others. Jack also notices for the first time in his life that men who are not white are not treated as well as he is treated by the police. In fact, he even blames his preoccupation with Happy Chang's fate at the police station for his not seeing the ball, which may be another excuse for his bad behavior. The suggestion is that Jack, who has always thought of himself as being just right, is suddenly rattled out of his complacency by the smile on Happy Chang's face, but other than his sudden awareness that he looks like a loser on television, Jack has learned very little during his year alone. Although he notices that the police officers treat Happy Chang roughly, he does not complain when the police manhandle him. Jack does not see difference; he does not see how the Other is treated. He is a privileged white man complacent enough in his homophobia to abuse his gay son and excuse his inclination for ogling a pretty twelve-year-old girl whom he hopes with all his heart will not turn out to be a lesbian.

87. Ibid.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid.

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