STRIKE

To Harrie, with love from me to you

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MITCH JOHNSON

Place the ball. Pick your spot. Three steps back.

Breathe.

I feel my chest rise and fall. A cool breeze ripples the red material of my shirt. Off to one side, the corner flag twitches and flutters.

Breathe.

The goalkeeper yells at the players in front of him. He wants an extra man in the wall – a fifth. He's panicking. The free kick is in the best possible position for me, which is the worst possible position for him: far enough out to get the ball up and over the wall, but close enough that he will see it late. Very late. Too late.

Breathe.

Teddy stands a few paces to my right. He runs a hand

through his shock of ginger hair, judging the distance to goal. But he's a decoy. He'll take one step and stop, which is when I'll whip the ball over the wall and into the top corner. Just like we practised. Over and over and over again.

Breathe.

I hear someone clap from the sideline and I know, even before he speaks, that it's Dad.

"You've got this, Owen."

He almost manages to keep the tension out of his voice. Almost. But I know he must be nervous. He's the coach, after all, and we're one-nil down in the Youth Cup final with seconds left on the clock. This free kick will be the last kick of the game.

Unless I score.

Breathe.

I listen as the referee tells the wall to move back, but my eyes are fixed on the ball. I don't look at the goal. I know where the goal is. The goal never moves. I don't look at the keeper either. He'll be dead centre. He has to be, if he wants to cover both sides. And I don't look at the other touchline, the one opposite Dad and all the other parents, where two men stand apart from each other.

The scouts. The *actual* scouts: one from Liverpool and one from Everton, which explains the unfriendly distance between them – and the reason my heart is hammering in my chest.

Breathe.

"You've got this, Owen," Dad says again, as though reading my mind. "Eight days a week."

That makes me smile. It's a joke: I'm so obsessed with football Mum used to say I play eight days a week. I hum a line from the Beatles song of the same name quietly under my breath.

Breathe.

I visualize the flight of the ball, imagine the satisfying sound of it hitting the back of the net. Teddy is the one I'll turn to first to celebrate with, just like I always have. We've been playing together for so long that he's something else I don't have to look at; I know where he'll be instinctively. But I look at him now and he gives me a tight, determined nod.

Breathe.

The five-man wall is set. The referee takes up his position and blows the whistle. A sudden hush descends on the pitch. I can feel every pair of eyes on me.

This is it.

Teddy takes a step towards the ball and stops. That's my cue. I run up and swing my right leg, wrapping the inside of my boot around the ball. The connection is beautiful, and I know even before the ball leaves my boot that it's good. The defenders jump in a desperate attempt to block the shot but the ball arcs over their heads and immediately dips towards the top corner. Through the wall of bodies, I glimpse the goalkeeper take a step to the right and stop short, his face turned to the sky. Like everyone else, he is powerless now, a spectator.

Time seems to slow. I hear someone on the touchline let out a tormented shriek as the ball glides towards the goal. I notice the corner flag snap to attention as a sudden gust whips across the pitch. I feel my heart beat once.

I lose sight of the ball as it dips behind the wall. I wait for the sound – that soft purr as the ball rolls across the squares of the net. I hold my breath.

And then the sound comes – only it isn't the sound I'm expecting. Instead of that satisfying purr, what I hear is a loud, clanging rattle as the ball cracks against the crossbar. It flies high into the air and I'm already moving towards the box in case it drops in front of the goal. But then I stop. It's dropping behind, out of play, into touch.

And then I hear another sound, startlingly close and

deafeningly loud: two short toots on a whistle, followed by a long blast.

And then I hear a third sound. Cheering. From the touchline but mostly from right in front of me. The wall has become a huddle, bouncing up and down as more players pile in to join the celebrations.

I squat down on my heels and run a hand across my forehead.

I missed.

We lost.

I *missed*.

I feel Teddy's hand ruffle the hair on the back of my head.

"I thought that was going in, mate," he says.

So did I.

But I *missed*.

"Next time." He reaches a hand under my arm and hauls me to my feet.

I can't face him or any of my teammates. Most of them are lying scattered around the penalty area like casualties on a battlefield. I've let them all down. Even worse, I've let Dad down. He's poured so much time and energy into me and this team, and it's all been for nothing.

Because of me.

The thought of seeing his disappointment is so unbearable that I turn the other way, towards the opposite touchline, then really wish I hadn't.

The scouts – the ones I'd dreamed of impressing and being signed by at the full-time whistle – are walking away. I watch them pass the clubhouse, where the Youth Cup trophy and medals are arranged on a table. I watch them enter the car park. I watch them climb into their cars and drive away, taking my dreams with them.

They don't look back.

I shuffle around the pitch after the game, shaking hands with the other players. Then I stand in a circle with my teammates and listen to Dad deliver a team talk. I don't hear a word of it. I watch numbly as the other team is presented with the trophy. *Their* trophy. I clap for as long as I can manage, then I go and sit on the touchline.

We're pretty much the last ones to leave, what with Dad being the coach. I want to go to bed and crawl under the covers and never emerge again, but instead I have to hang around, getting colder as the wind picks up. Teddy comes over and drapes a jacket around my shoulders. He sits beside me while Dad stuffs bibs and cones into a big holdall. Teddy doesn't say anything – just sits there. We watch the car park empty. Then we watch Dad take the nets down.

Eventually, he's ready to go. We help Dad carry one of the bags and dump it in the boot, before flopping onto the back seat. Dad gets in but doesn't start the car. He sits with his hands resting on the steering wheel.

"Want to talk about it?" he says, looking at us in the rear-view mirror. "Five-minute rule?"

The "five-minute rule" means we can talk about a match for five minutes, but then we have to move on. It's a way of making sure we don't sulk over defeats or get too carried away with a win. Today, it's obviously about sulk-avoidance.

Normally I'm happy to dissect a game, even the ones we lose. But there isn't usually as much at stake as there was today. And it's usually not my fault. I can tell Teddy doesn't want to talk either. He keeps his eyes down, pulling at a loose thread on the hem of his shorts. I shake my head.

"I see," Dad says. "It must be serious. How about a song?"

Neither of us respond, which Dad obviously takes as a yes. He taps his phone screen and a few seconds later, the opening bars of "Hey Jude" play through the car's speakers.

"I don't want to feel better," I mutter, looking out at the white frames of the empty goals.

Surprisingly, Dad hears me. "I know how you feel," he says.

And he does know.

But now isn't the time for *that* conversation.

He starts the car and drives us home.

By the time we drop Teddy back at his house, I do feel slightly better. But also sadder, because the music reminds me of Mum.

Music is weird like that.

When we get home, the car makes an angry screeching noise as Dad reverses into a tight space by the kerb. It's been making that sound for a while. Dad kills the engine and we sit in silence, listening to the car settle. Then he twists round to face me properly. I can sense a team talk coming, whether I want it or not. I keep my eyes on our narrow house, squashed in between all the others.

"I know you're upset, Owen, but you just played one of the best matches I've ever seen you play. We lost by a single goal to a very good team. There's a lot to be proud of."

I know he's right. I also know that spinach is good for you. Doesn't mean I want it.

"I missed," I say, hating how small my voice sounds.

"You mean that free kick? Owen, it was almost perfect."

"*Almost* wasn't good enough. I should have scored. *You* would have scored. The team was counting on me." I see my scowl deepen, reflected in the glass. "I let them down."

"Ha!" Dad says, so loudly and unexpectedly that it makes me jump.

"What?" I say, frowning at him. "What's so funny?"

Dad looks at me – properly looks at me – and his eyes are wet and kind and full of something so honest it makes me squirm a little: love, or pride, or hope.

"Owen, the only way to let your teammates down is to give up, to not try. There is no other way. You tried your best, and no one can ask for more than that." He reaches back and tilts my face so that our eyes are level. "Chin up, son."

"But the scouts…" I say.

"Don't worry about them. One of them was from Everton anyway." He grimaces. "Can you imagine?"

I smile even though I'm not done sulking. Dad supports Liverpool: Mum supported Everton. The battle for my allegiance began the moment I was born, which is why in some baby photos I'm wearing tiny Liverpool kits, and in

others I'm wearing tiny Everton ones. Dad swears the reason I love ketchup so much is because he used to put it with every meal, so that there would always be red on my plate.

But in the end, I shocked them both by picking Tranmere Rovers – the undisputed third best team on Merseyside. I just couldn't pick between Liverpool and Everton: it felt too much like choosing one parent over the other. I could tell they were both disappointed, but they were also relieved. I remember Mum turning to Dad and saying, "I thought he was going to say the 'M word'."

The "M word" is *Manchester*. It pretty much counts as swearing in our house.

"Maybe I'll get spotted by Tranmere," I say now, deciding to play along.

"Hey," Dad says, smiling. "You didn't play *that* badly."

"Tranmere Rovers are on the up!"

"You're probably right about that," he says. "After all, it's not like they can go much further down." He winks. "And you're right about something else too."

"What's that?" I ask.

"I probably would have scored that free kick."

"In your dreams!"