FICTION

AGREEABLE

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Photograph by Ben Mckeown

f Patty hadn't been an atheist, she might have thanked the good Lord for school a

In Patty grew up in Westchester County, New York. She was the oldest of four children, the other three of whom were more like what her parents had been hoping for. She was notably Larger than everybody else in the family, also Less Unusual, also measurably Dumber. Not actually dumb but relatively dumber. She grew up to be five feet nine and a half, which was almost the same height as her brother and numerous inches taller than her sisters, and sometimes she wished she could have gone ahead and been six feet, since she was never going to fit into the family anyway. Being able to see the basket better and to post up in traffic and to rotate more freely on defense might have given her a somewhat less vicious competitive streak, leading to a happier life post-college; probably not, but it was interesting to think about. By the time she got to the collegiate level, she was usually one of the shorter players on the floor, which in a funny way reminded her of her position in her family and helped keep her adrenaline at peak levels.

Patty's first memory of doing a team sport with her mother watching was also one of her last. She was attending ordinary-person Sports daycamp at the same complex where her sisters were doing extraordinary-person Arts daycamp, and one day her mother and sisters showed up for the late innings of a softball game. Patty was frustrated to be standing in left field waiting around for somebody to hit a ball deep while less skilled girls made errors in the infield. She started creeping in shallower and shallower, which was how the game ended. Runners on first and second. The batter hit a bouncing ball to the grossly uncoördinated shortstop, whom Patty ran in front of so that she could field the ball herself and run and tag out the lead runner and then start chasing the other runner, some sweet girl who'd probably reached first on a fielding error. Patty bore down straight at her, and the girl ran squealing into the outfield, leaving the base path for an automatic out, but Patty kept chasing her and applied the tag while the girl crumpled up and screamed at the apparently horrible pain of being lightly touched by a glove.

Patty was aware that this was not her finest hour of sportsmanship. Something had come over her because her family was watching. In the family station wagon on the way home, her mother asked her, in an even more quavering voice than usual, if she had to be quite so . . . *aggressive*. If it was necessary to be, well, to be so aggressive. Would it have hurt Patty to share the ball a little with her teammates? Patty replied that she hadn't been getting *any* balls in left field. And her mother said, "I don't mind if you play sports, but only if it's going to teach you coöperation and community-mindedness." And Patty said, "So send me to a *real* camp where I won't be the only good player! I can't coöperate with people who can't catch the ball!" And her mother said, "I'm not sure it's a good idea to be encouraging so much aggression and competition. I guess I'm not a sports fan, but I don't see the fun in defeating people just for the sake of defeating them. Wouldn't it be much more fun to all work together?"

Patty's mother was a professional Democrat. She later became a state assemblywoman, the Honorable Joyce Emerson, known for her advocacy of open space, poor children, and the Arts. Paradise for Joyce was an open space where poor children could go and do Arts at state expense. She was born Joyce Markowitz in Brooklyn in 1934 but apparently disliked being Jewish from the earliest dawn of consciousness. (Patty sometimes wondered if one reason that Joyce's voice always trembled was from struggling so hard all her life to not sound like Brooklyn.) Joyce got a scholarship to study liberal Arts in the woods of Maine, where she met Patty's exceedingly Gentile dad, whom she married at All Souls Unitarian Church on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. When young Jack Kennedy got the Democratic nomination, in 1960, it gave Joyce a

noble and stirring excuse to get out of a house that she couldn't seem to help filling up with babies. Then came civil rights, and Vietnam, and Bobby Kennedy—more good reasons to be out of a house that wasn't nearly big enough for four little kids plus a Barbadian nanny in the basement. Joyce went to her first national convention in 1968 as a delegate committed to dead Bobby. She served as county Party treasurer and later chairwoman and organized for Teddy in 1972 and 1980. Every summer, all day long, herds of volunteers tramped in and out of the house's open doors carrying boxes of campaign gear. Patty could practice dribbling and layups for six hours straight without anybody noticing or caring.

Patty's father, Ray, was a lawyer and amateur humorist whose repertory included fart jokes and mean parodies of his children's teachers, neighbors, and friends. A torment he particularly enjoyed inflicting on Patty was mimicking the Barbadian, Eulalie, when she was just out of earshot, saying, "Stop de game now, stop de playin'," in a louder and louder voice, until Patty ran from the dinner table in mortification and her siblings shrieked with excitement. Endless fun could also be had ridiculing Patty's coach and mentor Sandy Mosher, whom Ray liked to call Saaaandra. He was constantly asking Patty whether Saaaandra had had any gentlemen callers lately or maybe, tee hee, tee hee, some *gentlelady* callers? Her siblings chorused, "Saaaandra, Saaaandra!" Other amusing methods of tormenting Patty were to hide the family dog, Elmo, and pretend that Elmo had been euthanized while Patty was at late basketball practice. Or tease Patty about certain factual errors she'd made many years earlier—ask her how the kangaroos in *Austria* were doing, or whether she'd seen the latest novel by the famous contemporary writer Louisa May Alcott, or whether she still thought funguses were part of the animal kingdom. "I saw one

of Patty's funguses chasing a truck the other day," her father would say. "Look, look at me, this is how Patty's fungus chases a truck."

Most nights her dad went back to work after dinner to meet with the poor people he was defending in court for little or no money. He had an office across the street from the courthouse in White Plains. His pro-bono clients included Puerto Ricans, Haitians, transvestites, and the mentally or physically disabled. Some of them were in such bad trouble that he didn't even make fun of them behind their backs. As much as possible, though, he found their problems amusing. In tenth grade, for a school project, Patty sat in on two trials that her dad was part of. One was a case against an unemployed Yonkers man who had drunk too much on Puerto Rican Day and gone looking for his wife's brother, intending to cut him with a knife, but hadn't found him and had instead cut up a stranger in a bar. Not only Ray but the judge and even the prosecutor seemed amused by the defendant's haplessness and stupidity. They kept exchanging little not-quite winks. As if misery and disfigurement and jail time were all just a lower-class sideshow designed to perk up their otherwise boring day.

On the train ride home, Patty asked her dad whose side he was on.

"Ha, good question," he answered. "You have to understand, my client is a liar. The victim is a liar. And the bar owner is a liar. They're all liars. Of course, my client is entitled to a vigorous defense. But you have to try to serve justice, too. Sometimes the P.A. and the judge and I are working together as much as the P.A. is working with the victim or I'm working with the defendant. You've heard of our adversarial system of justice?"

"Yes."

"Well. Sometimes the P.A. and the judge and I all have the same adversary. We try to sort out the facts and avoid a miscarriage. Although don't, uh. Don't put that in your paper."

“I thought sorting out facts was what the grand jury and the jury are for.”

“That’s right. Put that in your paper. Trial by a jury of your peers. That’s important.”

“But most of your clients are innocent, right?”

“Not many of them deserve as bad a punishment as somebody’s trying to give them.”

“But a lot of them are completely innocent, right? Mommy says they have trouble with the language, or the police aren’t careful about who they arrest, and there’s prejudice against them, and lack of opportunity.”

“All of that is entirely true, Pattycakes. Nevertheless, uh. Your mother can be somewhat dewy-eyed.”

Patty minded his ridiculing less when her mother was the butt of it.

“I mean, you saw those people,” he said to her. “Jesus Christ. El ron me puso loco.”

An important fact about Ray was that his family had a lot of money. His parents lived on a big ancestral estate out in the hills of northwest New Jersey, in a pretty stone modernist house that was supposedly designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and was hung with minor works by famous French Impressionists. Every summer, the entire Emerson clan gathered by the lake at the estate for holiday picnics that Patty mostly failed to enjoy. Her granddad, August, liked to grab his oldest granddaughter around the belly and sit her down on his bouncing thigh and get God only knows what kind of little thrill from this; he was certainly not very respectful of Patty’s physical boundaries. Starting in seventh grade, she also had to play doubles with Ray and his junior partner and the partner’s wife, on the grandparental clay tennis court, and be stared at by

the junior partner, in her exposing tennis clothes, and feel self-conscious and confused by his ocular pawing.

Like Ray, August had bought the right to be privately eccentric by doing good public legal works; he'd made a name for himself defending high-profile conscientious objectors and draft evaders in three wars. In his spare time, which he had much of, he grew grapes on his property and fermented them in one of the outbuildings. His "winery" was called Doe Haunch and was a major family joke. At the holiday picnics, August tottered around in flip-flops and saggy swim trunks, clutching one of his crudely labelled bottles, refilling the glasses that his guests had discreetly emptied into grass or bushes. "What do you think?" he asked. "Is it good wine? Do you like it?" He was sort of like an eager boy hobbyist and sort of like a torturer intent on punishing every victim equally. Citing European custom, August believed in giving children wine, and when the young mothers were distracted with corn to shuck or competitive salads to adorn he watered his Doe Haunch Reserve and pressed it on kids as young as three, gently holding their chins, if necessary, and pouring the mixture into their mouths, making sure it went down. "You know what that is?" he said. "That's wine." If a child then began to act strangely, he said, "What you're feeling is called being drunk. You drank too much. You're drunk." This with a disgust no less sincere for being friendly. Patty, always the oldest of the kids, observed these scenes with silent horror, leaving it to a younger sibling or cousin to sound the alarm: "Granddaddy's getting the little kids drunk!" While the mothers came running to scold August and snatch their kids away, and the fathers tittered dirtily about August's obsession with female deer hindquarters, Patty slipped into the lake and floated in its warmest shallows, letting the water stop her ears against her family.

"And you thought I couldn't find Hudson River views in your price range."

Cartoon by Christopher Weyant

Her granddad had once been a true athlete, a college track star and football tight end, which was probably where her height and reflexes came from. Ray also had played football but in Maine for a school that could barely field a team. His real game was tennis, which was the one sport Patty hated, although she was good at it. She believed that Björn Borg was secretly weak. With very few exceptions (e.g., Joe Namath), she wasn't impressed with male athletes in general. Her specialty was crushes on popular boys who were enough older or better-looking to be totally unrealistic choices. Being a very agreeable person, however, she went on dates with practically anybody who asked. She thought shy or unpopular boys had a hard life, and she took pity on them insofar as was humanly possible. For some reason, many of these boys were wrestlers. In her experience, wrestlers were brave, taciturn, geeky, beetle-browed, polite, and not afraid of female jocks. One of them confided to her that in middle school she'd been known to him and his friends as the She-Monkey.

As far as actual sex goes, Patty's first experience of it was being raped at a party when she was seventeen by a boarding-school senior named Ethan Post. Ethan didn't do any sports except golf, but he had six inches of height and fifty pounds on Patty and provided discouraging perspectives on female muscle strength as compared with men's. What he did to Patty didn't strike her as a gray-area sort of rape. When she started fighting, she fought hard, if not well, and only for so long, because she was drunk for one of the first times ever. She'd been feeling so wonderfully free! Very probably, in the vast swimming pool at Kim McClusky's, on a beautiful warm May night, Patty had given Ethan Post a mistaken impression. She was far too agreeable even when she wasn't drunk. In the pool, she must have been giddy with agreeability. Altogether, there was much to blame herself for. Her notions of romance were like Gilligan's Island: "as primitive as can be." They fell somewhere between Snow White and Nancy Drew. And Ethan undeniably had the arrogant look that attracted her at that point in time. He resembled the love interest from a girls' novel with sailboats on the cover. After he raped Patty, he said he was sorry "it" had been rougher than he'd meant "it" to be, he was sorry about that.

It was only after the piña coladas wore off, early the next morning, in the bedroom that Patty shared with her littler sister so that their middle sister could have her own room to be Creative in: only then did she get indignant. The indignity was that Ethan had considered her such a nothing that he could just rape her and then take her home. And she was *not* such a nothing. She was, among other things, already, as a junior, the all-time single-season record holder for assists at Horace Greeley High School. A record she would demolish the following year! She was also first-team all-state in a state that *included Brooklyn and the Bronx*. And yet a golfing boy she hardly even knew had thought it was O.K. to rape her.

To avoid waking her little sister, she went and cried in the shower. This was, without exaggeration, the most wretched hour of her life. Things that had

never occurred to her before—such as the injustice of an oldest daughter having to share a room (instead of being given Eulalie's old room in the basement, which was now filled floor to ceiling with outdated campaign paraphernalia), also the injustice of her mother being so enthralled about her middle daughter's thespian performances but never going to any of Patty's games—occurred to her now. She was so indignant that she almost felt like talking to somebody. But she was afraid to let her coach or teammates know she'd been drinking.

How the story came out, in spite of her best efforts to keep it buried, was that Coach Nagel got suspicious and spied on her in the locker room after the next day's game. Sat Patty down in her office and confronted her regarding her bruises and unhappy demeanor. Patty humiliated herself by immediately and sobbingly confessing to all. To her total shock, Coach then proposed taking her to the hospital and notifying the police. Patty had just gone three-for-four with two runs scored and several outstanding defensive plays. She obviously wasn't greatly harmed. Also, her parents were political friends of Ethan's parents, so that was a nonstarter. She dared to hope that an abject apology for breaking training, combined with Coach's pity and leniency, would put the matter to rest. But, oh, how wrong she was.

Coach called Patty's house and got Patty's mother, who, as always, was running out to a meeting and had neither time to talk nor yet the moral wherewithal to admit that she didn't have time to talk. Coach spoke these indelible words into the P.E. department's beige telephone: "Your daughter just told me that she was raped last night by a boy named Ethan Post." Coach then listened to the phone for a minute before saying, "No, she just now told me. . . . That's right. . . . Just last night . . . Yes, she is." And handed Patty the telephone.

"Patty?" her mother said. "Are you—all right?"

"I'm fine."

“Mrs. Nagel says there was an incident last night?”

“The incident was I was raped.”

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. Last night?”

“Yes.”

“I was home this morning. Why didn’t you say something?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why, why, why? Why didn’t you say something to me?”

“Maybe it just didn’t seem like such a big deal right then.”

“So but then you did tell Mrs. Nagel.”

“No,” Patty said. “She’s just more observant than you are.”

“I hardly saw you this morning.”

“I’m not blaming you. I’m just saying.”

“And you think you might have been . . . It might have been . . .”

“Raped.”

“I can’t believe this,” her mother said. “I’m going to come and get you.”

“Coach Nagel wants me to go to the hospital.”

“Are you not all right?”

“I already said. I’m fine.”

"Then just stay put, and don't either of you do anything until I get there."

Patty hung up the phone and told Coach that her mother was coming.

"We're going to put that boy in jail for a long, long time," Coach said.

"Oh no no no no no," Patty said. "No, we're not."

"Patty."

"It's just not going to happen."

"It will if you want it to."

"No, actually, it won't. My parents and the Posts are political friends."

"Listen to me," Coach said. "That has nothing to do with anything. Do you understand?"

Patty was quite certain that Coach was wrong about this. Dr. Post was a cardiologist, and his wife was from big money. They had one of the houses that people such as Teddy Kennedy and Ed Muskie and Walter Mondale made visits to when they were short of funds. Over the years, Patty had heard much tell of the Posts' "back yard" from her parents. This back yard was apparently about the size of Central Park but nicer. Conceivably one of Patty's straight-A, grade-skipping, Arts-doing sisters could have brought trouble down on the Posts, but it was absurd to imagine the hulking B-student family jock making a dent in the Posts' armor.

"I'm just never going to drink again," she said, "and that will solve the

problem."

"Maybe for you," Coach said, "but not for somebody else. Look at your arms. Look what he did. He'll do that to somebody else if you don't stop him."

"It's just bruises and scratches."

Coach here made a motivational speech about standing up for your teammates, which in this case meant all the young women Ethan might ever meet. The upshot was that Patty was supposed to press charges and let Coach inform the New Hampshire prep school where Ethan was a student, so that he could be expelled and denied a diploma, and that if Patty didn't do this she would be letting down her team.

Patty began to cry again, because she would almost rather have died than let a team down. Earlier in the winter, she'd played most of a half of basketball with the flu, before fainting on the sideline and getting fluids intravenously. The problem now was that she hadn't been with her own team the night before. She'd gone to the party with her field-hockey friend Amanda, whose soul was apparently never going to be at rest until she'd induced Patty to sample piña coladas, vast buckets of which had been promised at the McCluskys'. El ron me puso loca. None of the other girls at the McCluskys' swimming pool were jocks. Almost just by showing up there, Patty had betrayed her true team. And now she'd been punished for it. Ethan hadn't raped one of the fast girls, he'd raped Patty, because she didn't belong there; she didn't even know how to drink.

She promised Coach to give the matter some thought.

It was shocking to see her mother in the gym and obviously shocking to her mother to find herself there. She was wearing her everyday pumps and resembled Goldilocks in daunting woods as she peered around uncertainly at the naked metal equipment and the fungal floors and the clustered balls in

mesh bags. Patty went to her and submitted to embrace. Her mother being much smaller of frame, Patty felt somewhat like a grandfather clock that Joyce was endeavoring to lift and move. She broke away and led Joyce into Coach's little glass-walled office so that the necessary conference could be had.

"Hi, I'm Jane Nagel," Coach said.

"Yes, we've—met," Joyce said.

"Oh, you're right, we did meet once," Coach said.

In addition to her strenuous elocution, Joyce had strenuously proper posture and a masklike Pleasant Smile suitable for nearly all occasions public and private. Because she never raised her voice, not even in anger (her voice just got more strained when she was mad), her Pleasant Smile could be worn even at moments of excruciating conflict.

"No, it was more than once," she said now. "It was several times."

"Really?"

"I'll be outside," Patty said, closing the door behind her.

The parent-coach conference didn't last long. Joyce soon came out on clicking heels and said, "Let's go."

Coach, standing in the doorway behind Joyce, gave Patty a significant look. The look meant *Don't forget what I said about teamwork.*

Joyce's car was the last one left in its quadrant of the visitor lot. She put the key in the ignition but didn't turn it. Patty asked what was going to happen now.

"Your father's at his office," Joyce said. "We'll go straight there."

But she didn't turn the key.

"I'm sorry about this," Patty said.

"What I don't understand," her mother burst out, "is how such an outstanding athlete as you are—I mean, how could Ethan, or whoever it was—"

"Ethan. It was Ethan."

"How could anybody—or Ethan," she said. "You say it's pretty definitely Ethan. How could—if it's Ethan—how could he have . . . ?" Her mother hid her mouth with her fingers. "Oh, I wish it had been almost anybody else. Dr. and Mrs. Post are such good friends of—good friends of so many good things. And I don't know Ethan well, but—"

"I hardly know him at all!"

"Well then how could this happen!"

"Let's just go home."

"No. You have to tell me. I'm your mother."

Hearing herself say this, Joyce looked embarrassed. She seemed to realize how peculiar it was to have to remind Patty who her mother was. And Patty, for one, was glad to finally have this doubt out in the open. If Joyce was her mother, then how had it happened that she hadn't come to the first round of the state tournament, when Patty had broken the all-time Horace Greeley girls' tournament scoring record with thirty-two points? Somehow everybody else's mother had found time to come to that game.

She showed Joyce her wrists.

"*This* is what happened," she said. "I mean, part of what happened."

Joyce looked once at the bruises, shuddered, and then turned away as if respecting Patty's privacy. "This is terrible," she said. "You're right. This is terrible."

"Coach Nagel says I should go to the emergency room and tell the police and tell Ethan's headmaster."

"Yes, I know what your coach wants. She seems to feel that castration might be an appropriate punishment. What I want to know is what *you* think."

"I don't know what I think."

"If you want to go to the police now," Joyce said, "we'll go to the police. Just tell me if that's what you want."

"I guess we should tell Dad first."

So down the Saw Mill they went. Joyce was always driving Patty's siblings to Painting, Guitar, Ballet, Japanese, Debate, Drama, Piano, Fencing, and Mock Court, but Patty herself seldom rode with Joyce anymore. Most weekdays she came home very late on the jock bus. If she had a game, somebody else's mom or dad dropped her off. If she and her friends were ever stranded, she knew not to bother calling her parents but to go ahead and use the Westchester Cab dispatcher's number and one of the twenty-dollar bills that her mother made her always carry. It never occurred to her to use the twenties for anything but cabs, or to go anywhere after a game except straight home, where she peeled aluminum foil off her dinner at ten or eleven o'clock and went down to the basement to wash her uniform while she ate and watched reruns. She often fell asleep down there.

“Here’s a hypothetical question,” Joyce said, driving. “Do you think it might be enough if Ethan formally apologized to you?”

“He already apologized.”

“For—”

“For being rough.”

“And what did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything. I said I wanted to go home.”

“But he did apologize for being rough.”

“O.K., you’re good. Next!”

Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

“It wasn’t a real apology.”

“All right. I’ll take your word for it.”

“I just want him to know I still *exist*.”

"Whatever *you* want—sweetie."

Joyce pronounced this "sweetie" like the first word of a foreign language she was learning.

As a test or a punishment, Patty said, "Maybe, I guess, if he apologized in a really sincere way, that might be enough." And she looked carefully at her mother, who was struggling (it seemed to Patty) to contain her excitement.

"That sounds to me like a nearly ideal solution," Joyce said. "But only if you really think it would be enough for you."

"It wouldn't," Patty said.

"I'm sorry?"

"I said it wouldn't be enough."

"I thought you just said it would be."

Patty began to cry again very desolately.

"I'm sorry," Joyce said. "Did I misunderstand?"

"*He raped me like it was nothing. I'm probably not even the first.*"

"You don't know that, Patty."

"I want to go to the hospital."

"Look, here, we're almost at Daddy's office. Unless you're actually hurt, we might as well—"

"But I already know what he'll say. I know what he'll want me to do."

"He'll want to do whatever's best for you. Sometimes it's hard for him to express it, but he loves you more than anything."

Joyce could hardly have made a statement that Patty more fervently longed to believe was true. Wished, with her whole being, were true. Didn't her dad tease her and ridicule her in ways that would have been simply cruel if he didn't secretly love her more than anything? But she was seventeen now and not actually dumb. She knew that you could love somebody more than anything and still not love the person all that much, if you were busy with other things.

There was a smell of mothballs in her father's inner sanctum, which he'd taken over from his now deceased senior partner without redoing the carpeting or the curtains. Where exactly the mothball smell came from was one of those mysteries.

"What a rotten little shit!" was Ray's response to the tidings his daughter and wife brought of Ethan Post's crime.

"Not so little, unfortunately," Joyce said with a dry laugh.

"He's a rotten little shit punk," Ray said. "He's a bad seed!"

"So do we go to the hospital now?" Patty said. "Or to the police?"

Her father told her mother to call Dr. Sipperstein, her old pediatrician, who'd been involved in Democratic politics since Roosevelt, and see if he was available for an emergency. While Joyce made this call, Ray asked Patty if she knew what rape was.

She stared at him.

"Just checking," he said. "You do know the actual legal definition."

"He had sex with me against my will."

"Did you actually say no?"

" 'No,' 'don't,' 'stop.' Anyway, it was obvious. I was trying to scratch him and push him off me."

"Then he is a despicable piece of shit."

She'd never heard her father talk this way, and she appreciated it, but only abstractly, because it didn't sound like him.

"Dave Sipperstein says he can meet us at five at his office," Joyce reported. "He's so fond of Patty I think he would have cancelled his dinner plans if he'd had to."

"Right," Patty said. "I'm sure I'm number one among his twelve thousand patients." She then told her dad her story, and her dad explained to her why Coach Nagel was wrong and she couldn't go to the police.

"Chester Post is not an easy person," Ray said, "but he does a lot of good in the county. Given his, uh, given his position, an accusation like this is going to generate extraordinary publicity. Everyone will know who the accuser is. Everyone. Now, what's bad for the Posts is not your concern. But it's virtually certain you'll end up feeling more violated by the pretrial and the trial and the publicity than you do right now. Even if it's pleaded out. Even with a suspended sentence, even with a gag order. There's still a court record."

Joyce said, "But this is all for *her* to decide, not—"

"Joyce." Ray stilled her with a raised hand. "The Posts can afford any lawyer in the country. And as soon as the accusation is made public the worst of the damage to the defendant is over. He has no incentive to speed things along. In fact, it's to his advantage to see that your reputation suffers as much as possible before a plea or a trial."

Patty bowed her head and asked what her father thought she should do.

"I'm going to call Chester now," he said. "You go see Dr. Sipperstein and make sure you're O.K."

"And get him as a witness," Patty said.

"Yes, he could testify if need be. But there isn't going to be a trial, Patty."

"So he just gets away with it? And does it to somebody else next weekend?"

Ray raised both hands. "Let me, ah. Let me talk to Mr. Post. He might be amenable to a deferred prosecution. Kind of a quiet probation. Sword over Ethan's head."

"But that's *nothing*."

"Actually, Pattycakes, it's quite a lot. It'd be your guarantee that he won't do this to someone else. Requires an admission of guilt, too."

It did seem absurd to imagine Ethan wearing an orange jumpsuit and sitting in a jail cell for inflicting a harm that was mostly in her head anyway. She'd done wind sprints that hurt as bad as being raped. She felt more beaten up after a tough basketball game than she did now. Plus, as a jock you got used to having other people's hands on you—kneading a cramped muscle, playing tight defense, scrambling for a loose ball, taping an ankle, correcting a stance, stretching a hamstring.

And yet: the feeling of injustice itself turned out to be strangely physical. Even realer, in a way, than her hurting, smelling, sweating body. Injustice had a shape, and a weight, and a temperature, and a texture, and a very bad taste.

In Dr. Sipperstein's office she submitted to examination like a good jock. After she'd put her clothes back on, he asked if she'd ever had intercourse before.

"No."

"I didn't think so. What about contraception? Did the other person use it?"

She nodded. "That's when I tried to get away. When I saw what he had."

"A condom."

"Yes."

All this and more Dr. Sipperstein jotted down on her chart. Then he took off his glasses and said, "You're going to have a good life, Patty. Sex is a great thing, and you'll enjoy it all your life. But this was not a good day, was it?"

At home, one of her siblings was in the back yard doing something like juggling with screwdrivers of different sizes. Another was reading Gibbon unabridged. The one who'd been subsisting on Yoplait and radishes was in the bathroom, changing her hair color again. Patty's true home amid all this brilliant eccentricity was a foam-cushioned, mildewed, built-in bench in the TV corner of the basement. The fragrance of Eulalie's hair oil still lingered on the bench years after Eulalie had been let go. Patty took a carton of butter-pecan ice cream down to the bench and answered no when her mother called down to ask if she was coming up for dinner.

Mary Tyler Moore was just starting when her father came down after his Martini and his own dinner and suggested that he and Patty go for a drive.

“Can I watch this show first?” she said.

“Patty.”

Feeling cruelly deprived, she turned off the television. Her dad drove them over to the high school and stopped under a bright light in the parking lot. They unrolled their windows, letting in the smell of spring lawns like the one she’d been raped on not many hours earlier.

“So,” she said.

“So Ethan denies it,” her dad said. “He says it was just roughhousing and consensual.”

Patty’s tears came on like a rain that starts unnoticeably but surprisingly soon soaks everything. She asked if her dad had spoken to Ethan directly.

“No, just his father, twice,” he said. “I’d be lying if I said the conversation went well.”

“So obviously Mr. Post doesn’t believe me.”

“Well, Patty, Ethan’s his son. He doesn’t know you as well as we do.”

“Do you believe me?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Does Mommy?”

“Of course she does.”

“Then what do I do?”

Her dad turned to her like an attorney. Like an adult addressing another adult.

"You drop it," he said. "Forget about it. Move on."

"What?"

"You shake it off. Move on. Learn to be more careful."

"Like it never even happened?"

"Patty, the people at the party were all friends of his. They're going to say they saw you get drunk and be aggressive with him. They'll say you were behind a shed that wasn't more than thirty feet from the pool, and they didn't hear anything untoward."

"It was really noisy. There was music and shouting."

"They'll also say they saw the two of you leaving later in the evening and getting into his car. And the world will see an Exeter boy who's going to Princeton and was responsible enough to use contraceptives, and gentleman enough to leave the party and drive you home."

The deceptive little rain was wetting the collar of Patty's T-shirt.

"You're not really on my side, are you," she said.

"Of course I am."

"You keep saying 'Of course,' 'Of course.' "

"Listen to me. The P.A. is going to want to know why you didn't scream."

"I was embarrassed! Those weren't my friends!"

“But do you see that this is going to be hard for a judge or a jury to understand? All you had to do was scream, and you would have been safe.”

Patty couldn’t remember why she hadn’t screamed. She had to admit that, in hindsight, it seemed bizarrely agreeable of her.

“I fought, though.”

“Yes, but you’re a top-tier student athlete. Shortstops get scratched and bruised all the time, don’t they? On the arms? On the thighs?”

“Did you tell Mr. Post I’m a virgin? I mean, was?”

“I didn’t consider that any of his business.”

“Maybe you should call him back and tell him that.”

“Look,” her dad said. “Honey. I know it’s horrendously unfair. I feel terrible for you. But sometimes the best thing is just to learn your lesson and make sure you never get in the same position again. To say to yourself, ‘I made a mistake, and I had some bad luck,’ and then let it. Let it, ah. Let it drop.”

He turned the ignition halfway, so that the panel lights came on. He kept his hand on the key.

“But he committed a crime,” Patty said.

“Yes, but better to, uh. Life’s not always fair, Pattycakes. Mr. Post said he thought Ethan might be willing to apologize for not being more gentlemanly, but. Well. Would you like that?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so.”

"Coach Nagel says I should go to the police."

"Coach Nagel should stick to her dribbling," her dad said.

"Softball," Patty said. "It's softball season now."

"Unless you want to spend your entire senior year being publicly humiliated."

"Basketball is in the winter. Softball is in the spring, when the weather's warmer?"

"I'm asking you: is that really how you want to spend your senior year?"

"Coach Carver is basketball," Patty said. "Coach Nagel is softball. Are you getting this?"

Her dad started the engine.

As a senior, instead of being publicly humiliated Patty became a real player, not just a talent. She all but resided in the field house. She got a three-game basketball suspension for putting a shoulder in the back of a New Rochelle forward who'd elbowed one of her teammates, and she still broke every school record she'd set the previous year, plus nearly broke the scoring record. Augmenting her reliable perimeter shooting was a growing taste for driving to the basket. She was no longer on speaking terms with physical pain.

In the spring, when the local state assemblyman stepped down after long service and the Party leadership chose Patty's mother to run as his replacement, the Posts offered to co-host a fund-raiser in the green luxury of their back yard. Joyce sought Patty's permission before she accepted the offer, saying she wouldn't do anything that Patty wasn't comfortable with, but by then Patty was beyond caring what Joyce did, and told her so. When the candidate's family stood for the obligatory family photo, no grief was given to Patty for absenting

herself. Her look of bitterness would not have helped Joyce's cause. ♦

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Jonathan Franzen is a frequent contributor to The New Yorker. His books include the novel "Crossroads."

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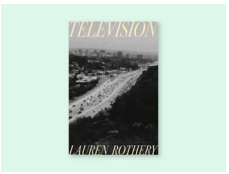

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Maybe the Justice Department should try a Word Search puzzle and a Connect the Dots.

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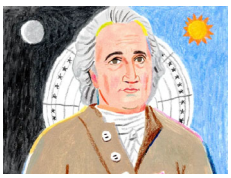
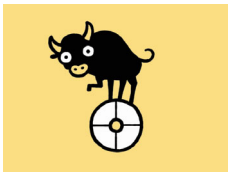


SHUFFALO

Shuffalo: Monday, December 1, 2025

Can you make a longer word with each new letter?



POEMS

"Blue Baby"

"You thought yourself lucky as a sickly / child, who got to spend whole days // reading long books in bed."

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The Crossword: Monday, December 1, 2025

Reason for a workplace accommodation, maybe: ten letters.

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Mamdani Family Values

Mahmood Mamdani, Zohran's father, just published his twelfth book. The subject? Dictators.

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