

My Losing Season

Pat Conroy, 2002

Prologue

This is the story of a mediocre basketball team that is remembered by few, a team that spent a year perfecting the art of falling to pieces. I thought I would be a senior on one of the greatest basketball teams in Citadel history. I could not have been more wrong.

Sports books are always about winning because winning is far more pleasurable and exhilarating to read about than losing. Winning is wonderful in every aspect, but the darker music of loss resonates on deeper, richer planes. I think about all the games of that faraway year that played such a part in shaping me, and it is the losses that stand out because they still make their approach with all their capacities to wound intact. Winning makes you think you'll always get the girl, land the job, deposit the million-dollar check, win the promotion, so you grow accustomed to a life of answered prayers. Winning shapes the soul of bad movies and novels and lives. It is the subject of thousands of insufferably bad books and is often a sworn enemy of art.

Loss is a fiercer, more uncompromising teacher, coldhearted but clear-eyed in its understanding that life is more dilemma than game, and more trial than free pass. My acquaintance with loss has sustained me during the stormy passages of my life when the pink slips came through the door, when the checks bounced at the bank, when I told my small children I was leaving their mother, when the despair caught up with me, when the dreams of suicide began feeling like love songs of release. It sustained me when my mother lay dying of leukemia, when my sister heard the ruthless voices inside her, and when my brother Tom sailed out into the starry night in Columbia, South Carolina, sailed from a fourteen-story building and plunged screaming to his death, binding all of his family into his nightmare forever. Though I learned some things from the games we won that year, I learned much, much more from loss.

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Epilogue

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. . . there is no teacher more discriminating or transforming than loss. The great secret of athletics is that you can learn more from losing than winning. No coach can afford to preach such a doctrine, but our losing season served as both model and template of how a life can go wrong and fall apart in even the most inconceivable places.

Losing prepares you for the heartbreak, setback, and tragedy that you will encounter in the world more than winning ever can. By licking your wounds you learn how to avoid getting wounded the next time. The American military learned more by its defeat in South Vietnam than it did in all the victories ever fought under the Stars and Stripes. Loss invites reflection and reformulating and a change of strategies. Loss hurts and bleeds and aches. Loss is always ready to call out your name in the night. Loss follows you home and taunts you at the breakfast table, follows you to work in the morning. You have to make accommodations and broker deals to soften the rabbit punches that loss brings to your daily life. You have to take the word "loser" and add it to your résumé and walk around with it on your name tag as it hand-feeds you your own shit in dosages too large for even great beasts to swallow. The word "loser" follows you, bird-dogs you, sniffs you out of whatever fields you hide in because you have to face things clearly and you cannot turn away from what is true. My team won eight games and lost seventeen . . . losers by any measure.