As my bike glided over cracked asphalt, past the store and towards the green church steeple, a breath of salt air rushed across my face and I knew that I was close to the field. It was the last week of summer, and that afternoon our island was hosting the annual rivalry softball game against nearby Longfield Island. Reaching the straightaway, I began to pedal harder, eager to escape the shadow of the looming Bartlett house. The decrepit home and its lone resident, Caleb Bartlett, were the subject of countless tales, whispered around cookout fires across the island. With the stories rattling in the back of my mind, I streaked past the house and down to the sloping field above the docks.

The field was bustling. The rivals from Longfield had tied up to the pier and most were chatting with the locals. I could hear them laughing aloud as stories were swapped, the latest island gossip mixed in with old fishing tales. Others were already zinging grimy softballs around the outfield and trapping them in worn leather gloves. I hopped off my bike and let it drop into the tall grass alongside the other abandoned rides. I snatched my mitt from the rat-trap and walked towards the crowd.

A rusted Ford pick-up pulled up at the side of the road. 
“Hey, Joe!” I turned in time to see a softball in mid-flight and reached back over my shoulder to snare it. I looked back to see a grinning Craig Tanner, the island handyman, stepping out of the truck. Laughing, I threw the ball back to him, and we loosened up as we made our way towards the rest of the team.

“Tannah, you betta move that truck when I’m at the plate!” shouted a tubby old salt with a paint-splattered blue t-shirt and frayed canvas pants, and topped with a tuft of white hair. “You pahked just beyond the right field wall.” He raised a bat, calling his shot in a passable imitation of The Bambino. Norman Greene was the town mascot, and just about the epitome of a Maine lobsterman. He bought his first boat when he was 17 years old and had been fishing for 60 years. Now his health was lagging, and his boat, the Rosamond, hadn’t left anchor in months. His red and blue buoys that had dotted the waters south of Mount Desert for so many years now sat stacked in a pile in his yard. His wife had died a few years back, but three of his four kids still lived on the island, working in the old family trade. He was a favorite of older locals and schoolchildren alike.

“Well, it looks like we might be a little short-handed. Just six of us. Unless you want to play Norman? Just coaching today? Okay, we can make do I guess. It’s island ball, we’ll take what we can get.”

The teams started to separate, and we grouped up around our captain, Holly Baker. Holly was the village postmaster, an eccentric character with dark, graying hair shooting out in all directions. Today she was wearing a stern smile that showed she meant business. She looked over our congregation and spoke.

We took the field, chatting and trying to figure out how to cover enough positions with a shortage of players. Holly took up her usual position on the mound. I grabbed a spot at third base. Lucy Bunker, the young proprietor of the store and art gallery moved to a spot behind second base and to the right, so as to cover both shortstop and second. Sarah Price, one of the island’s two schoolteachers, took first base. Craig moved out to
left field, and Roger Bunker, uncle of Lucy and owner of the seasonal restaurant down on the dock, trotted out to right.

The game began, and it became quickly apparent that we were going to need help. Holly was pitching well, but there was a glaring lack of defense behind her, as the remaining five of us struggled to cover all the gaps in the field. The rival Longfielders had apparently brought some of their big guns, a few lobstersmen who were enjoying their day off by smacking drives to all parts of the field.

The close bond between the island communities was clear. When the tall young fisherman Jesse Fryeman ripped a drive past Craig’s outstretched glove in left center and slid into second base, he shared an awkward greeting with Lucy. Their engagement, broken off five months earlier, was common knowledge on the island grapevine. Between batters we bantered over the prospect of an Indian summer, the American League wild-card race and whose kids had taken their first steps.

By the end of two innings it was clear that we were in trouble if more players couldn’t be found. Annoyed, Norman rose from his milk crate near the first base line and limped off towards the docks.

“Call to the bullpen,” he confided to me with a wink. Sure enough, within minutes Norman returned, flanked by Mark and Jack, his two sons who had gladly abandoned their crates of lobster and bait to help out the home team. Mark had played ball in his years at Orono, and Jack was known in schoolyard lore for his ability to drive a stone farther into the waves off Marsh Head than any other dad on the island. Energy seemed to surge up out of the dust at the sight of the arriving men.

With the addition of the Greene boys, we played almost evenly for a while. Still, each time Jesse Fryeman or one of his brawny Longfield cohorts ripped into a pitch, our lean outfield was forced into a struggling, sprinting chase, as the ball bounded and burrowed into untamed weeds. The game moved along and the sky grew overcast. The children who were present at the start of the game had long since moved down to their forts in the abandoned floats on the beach. Finally, a drive delivered by a hulking lefty fisherman found its mark, falling out of the air over the right field line and landing with a metallic thud on the roof of Craig’s truck. Norman cackled, shouting “I told you so” to Craig from his milk-crate perch.

As the Longfielders cheered and their slugger circled the bases, Roger jogged to retrieve the softball. He stopped abruptly, however, as a gaunt figure stepped from behind the Ford.

The man gripping the softball was dressed in plain dark clothes, a stark contrast to a face that was as pale as a downeast winter. His complexion and the way that he moved, stiffly inching forward with his eyes at his feet, suggested he was a man who had not ventured outside in months. Even the other team sensed the strained air of unfamiliar tension between our team and the stranger. An awed realization was beginning to soak in for me, and as I looked to view the reactions of my teammates I saw the same emotions reflected on their faces.

“Hello Caleb,” said Norman. “What brings you down to the field?”

“S-saw you playing out here.” Caleb Bartlett raised his eyes slightly. “Looked like you c-could use a left fielder.”

A long moment of silence ensued. It was Craig who finally broke it. Cracking a grin he called, “Sure we can!”

“Well,” cried Holly, “let’s play ball.”

With our now-complete team, we picked up speed and spirit. Caleb appeared more and more at home as the innings progressed, occasionally calling out his support for
our hitters or joining the infield chatter. When the last thunderstorm of the summer rolled in with loud, soaking force, the game was finally abandoned and we all ran to seek cover in the empty restaurant at the tip of the furthest pier.

When the sky finally lightened, the Longfielders moved towards the door, sad to end the party but anxious to reach home before dark. Our crowd also began to disperse. The screen door bounced closed and I saw Caleb Bartlett framed in the waning light against the distant mountains. Sarah called his name and hurried to catch up. I followed moments later and watched the two of them make conversation as they trudged up the dock towards the street.

I biked home that night despite the offer of a ride from Craig. For the first time I smiled while passing the old Bartlett house, and I thought about how that simple softball game had made a difference in at least one man’s life. I glided along, following the wet glow of streetlights until they stopped and then rode on alone through the dark.