

Life's Greatest Goal

When I'm asked to photograph Canyon Star University's men's soccer team, I try to refuse. Despite my recently acquired status as senior photographer, I've spent the start of the school year working on projects in the intramural and club department. It's comfortable; the stakes are low. But the limelight encroaches on my peace when my executive editor, Sydney, shoves another promotion down my throat in the form of Weston Lockwood.

"Bullshit Tatiana, come on," Sydney says over the phone from the comfort of the *CSU Sports Digest* studio. I'm currently standing in stubborn solitude outside our campus's soccer stadium. "Lockwood will be scouted at the College Cup by at least four major league teams. You never know, they could be scouting for a photographer, too. This could be the start of your career, or at least help you get a foot in the door."

I glance down at my camera hanging from a sunflower-patterned strap around my neck. Sydney is right, but the idea of capitalizing off Lockwood's rise to fame leaves a sour taste in my mouth. "Alright." I sigh and tuck my phone into my pocket as I head to the soccer field for the first time in my three and half years of college.

The practice starts at 7 p.m. and I photograph for the better part of an hour, mostly preliminary shots of the team and the field-stadium layout.

The Canyon Star Comets embark on their second hour of fitness conditioning as I make my way into the bleachers to photograph the field from afar, adjusting for the vibrant October sunset. I take pictures of empty seats with little carved messages on the plastic chair backings. The scoreboard, equipped with the CSU star and comet logo, becomes a looming silhouette in

the dusky sky. I circle around and descend back onto the field, where I plant myself behind one goal and take more shots as the team continues suicide sprints.

My senior journalist counterpart, Ben Gibson, is absent out of spite towards the fact that Lockwood ghosted the interview he was supposed to have with him yesterday. Seeing as I've been trying to ghost this project for the better part of the day, I can't hold it against him.

I get lost in my work, humming a tune under my breath as I journey up and down the goal line, switching lenses here and there and experimenting with my tripod. By 10:30 practice has come to an end. The team trudges off the field with sweat on their brows and turf stains over their knees. Some of them nod to me as they pass, while others gaze cautiously back towards a lone player who must be Lockwood continuing to run drills on his own. He has the sunflower-yellow captain's band to prove it.

"Make sure you get his good side," one of his teammates calls from the stadium gate before following the coach out.

Lockwood glances at me briefly, almost with threatening intent. *I dare you*, he seems to exude in the stiffness of his shoulders that wasn't there moments before when he was practicing, or in the childlike way he jams the point of a cleat into the turf when I raise my camera at him.

I lower it with dramatic resignation, shrugging with the intent of conveying, *this is my job, Captain Lockwood*.

He lines up a shot at the top of the penalty box. Shoots. The net rattles at the force of it. I lean against the goalpost unflinchingly and toy with the worn clips that attach my camera to its strap.

“You missed your interview yesterday.”

The pretentiousness from moments ago drains from his body. Or had I only assumed that’s what it had been? “I don’t like interviews very much,” he says. I take a couple shots of my own, his minimized form blinking in and out of existence in my viewfinder with each *chk, chk, chk*. “It’s like sitting on Santa’s lap but instead of asking what I want for Christmas he asks about my future desired salary.”

“I’m not here to ju—” Before I can finish, he fakes a shot at the goal and gives a hard, sharp pass to me. I fumble my camera in defense but receive the pass elegantly, the ball landing snugly against the inner cushion of my sneaker. A stirring of memories flutters up my leg at the contact, like the flurry of moth wings departing some ancient tome.

Lockwood smirks like he’s uncovered a secret and attempts to hide it behind the guise of a hand running through his wavy brown hair. “The last girl I did that to screeched and ran away.”

I take another picture of him then and ponder how his face would look lovely under a warm-toned filter. Strolling over to him, soccer ball in tow, I extend my hand. “Tatiana.” He shakes my hand in return, but before he can officially introduce himself, I grip my camera protectively in one hand, line up the ball in front of me, and shoot as best as anyone can in worn sneakers and a camera hanging from you. It’s a decent shot, but it strikes the post with a tolling sound and rolls back to us like a hunting dog returning with its tail between its legs. We both laugh and he says, “Not bad,” at the same instant I say, “A little rusty.”

He retrieves the soccer ball, and I pull out my phone to start an audio recording. “You, Weston Lockwood, are going to have to tell me about yourself eventually.” He crosses his arms over his chest, and there it is again—that little toddler peaking through, some youthful presence

that I suspect belongs solely to the soccer field and the soccer ball. It is the same stubborn meta-tantrum that had me standing outside of the stadium for thirty minutes needing to be talked into doing this, to remember the feeling of stepping onto the field. *That child*, I think, and point to my camera. “The camera tells a different kind of story. Anything you want. No interview questions asked.”

And so it begins.

When I was twelve my travel soccer team participated in a tournament up in Pioche. There are two things I remember distinctly, both having nothing and everything to do with the sport that had brought us to the doorstep of a rustic four-story hotel.

Hotel Tag was an anomalous thing reserved strictly for sports tournaments, for I never encountered the silly game elsewhere. Our ecstatic laughter echoed down dimly lit halls, accentuating the bizarre loops and whorls adorning the wallpaper, making a funhouse of the place. We split into factions, crouching in the stairwells and devising defensive plans. Gracie would watch the doors, while Hannah looked for allies who might know who was It. We broke into pairs and conducted reconnaissance missions, navigating the front lobby and sneaking bananas and apples from the breakfast bar, or rallying at the pool area where we could make a quick escape by water if need be. Hotel Tag forged in us an inexplicable bond, a reel of film binding us together in one of those moving picture books.

The only other thing I remember about that tournament was that we made it to the finals and lost. In our youth, it hadn’t meant a thing to us, and Hotel Tag was always waiting around the next bend.

Weston talks about his team in this way. How over the years they've melded like iron. Goalkeeper Larson is the pommel of their sword, with the defense line Danny, Allan, Chester, and Soren as the hilt that protects and guards and fortifies. Max, Brian, Logan, Tommy and Quinn (though they all call him Tumbleweed) control the midfield by providing length and force. Weston and Dale are strikers, the point of the attack, and the sting of the cut. Even off the field, they remain this way.

It is with this great force of nature that the CSU Comets win the game that secures their place in the College Cup, a 4-0 knockout sheathed by a goal scored by Tommy and assisted by Weston on a corner kick.

After the game, a local news station interviews the team. Ben and I stand at the front of the small crowd, the former scribbling furiously on his notepad while I listen. Someone asks Weston how he gets into the right mindset for an important game, and I half expect him to make some snide remark about Santa or eating an extra cookie before bed.

He finds my gaze and his lips quirk in a smirk I've become familiar with before he points to his yellow cleats. "My grandfather bought me my first pair of cleats," he says. "His Alzheimer's made him colorblind, and so when he thought he was buying me red, he'd really gotten yellow. He loved watching me play, so when I have my yellow cleats on nothing else matters. No matter how a game might go, he's always there with me on the field."

To look through the lens of a camera, I think, is to see through the eyes of a god. I pull matter in and out of focus, tilting and reframing. I decide what is light and what is dark. If I lie low on the grass, I might capture each lithe strand as it sways in the wind, or a yellow cleat trotting across worn ground in an erosion of passion, embraced by the backdrop of an evening

sun. Looking at this photo, you might lay your cheek on the earth and let the green whisper, like the soft hairs on an arm as a finger graces over it. It is with this spiritual intensity that I come to respect Weston's superstition. Perhaps even admire it.

October passes like the flipping of scrapbook pages. I collect photos as if they are fireflies in a jar, little sparks fusing together across the tapestry of my artistic vision. In casual conversation one evening after practice, Weston informs me that he's going to Vegas for the weekend to visit the Neon Museum for a sports history assignment he's working on.

"Might be some cool photography?" he ponders aloud as he zips my tripod bag up while I take extra care in wiping my camera lens clean. His throat works silently.

Running out of professional senior photographer tasks to excuse my lack of response, I sling my camera bag over a shoulder. "Don't you think one of your teammates would want to go?"

He counters, "I'm asking you."

He smirks as if he can't help it; something so absurdly *childish*. I roll my eyes and tell him I need to think about it, figure out my class workload and portfolio logistics, although I can't deny that part of that portfolio requires a reflection on public photography mediums. Museums are most definitely on that list.

I call him the next morning: "Fine, but this is not a date."

We drive through windy desert roads and mountainscapes that from afar look like those dirt hills at construction sites, arriving in Las Vegas Saturday afternoon. Weston and I meet up with some

of his sports history classmates and we hit the Neon Museum early to beat the rush, although its safe to say that Vegas is in a constant state of the word.

The group poses sporadically in front of the museum's multitude of neon signs exhibiting the city's history. The bright hues and patterns dance on their skin and nestle in their hair despite the daylight. Through my camera, they take notes quizzically and share ideas with one another, a million lightbulbs igniting around us as if by the spurring of their thoughts. We parade around the Strip, eating gelato and throwing peanut butter M&Ms at each other. Music and chatter floats in the air as if the city itself is conducting some great symphony.

We have dinner at Hard Rock Café, where I show some of my photos to a girl called Carly, another plus one of the group. "These are astonishing," she says as I click the browse button. "You know, my uncle is an executive director at Snow Sports Museum in Colorado. They do a lot of work with the Winter Olympics and are always looking for photographers. I could give you his contact info?" I don't quite know what to say but accept her offer graciously.

After a couple hours of drinking, we stumble back outside and continue to see the sights. At one point Weston takes my camera from me with bubbly fervor and snaps some photos of me spinning in front of the Bellagio fountain. "So, you said the museum wasn't a date," he notes more seriously. "How about I take you on one tomorrow before we leave?"

"You're drunk," I say, but I agree.

"I Googled you," Weston says to me sometime in mid-November, caution lacing his words as they leave his mouth in a puff of cold air. We're sitting at a scenic overlook in Red Rock Canyon. I pick at my camera strap clips, fighting the urge to drag him to the edge and shove him off. He

carefully places a hand on my knee. “My younger cousin goes to Red Rock High. She recognized your name when I mentioned you.”

He slips his phone from his pocket and begins typing. I could throw his phone over the edge too, but the thought that he’s been speaking to his family about me gives me pause. After some agonizing seconds, he shows me an image I recognize, accompanied by a Red Rock High newspaper article. In the image, a group of girls huddle together holding a trophy above them. “You guys won States that year,” Weston says. I nod but don’t say anything. “What made you stop? You never talk about it.”

“It’s complicated.” I sigh. I take the phone from his hand, tracing a feather-light finger over the image and for a fleeting second I fear I won’t recognize that girl from four years ago. But I find myself within the team huddle, baby blue captain’s band hugging my bicep. While everyone reaches up towards that golden trophy, my arms are wrapped around my teammates. She’s a different me, but me all the same. “I made varsity my freshman year. For some reason our captain, Jenny, hated that.” I chuckle and hand Weston his phone back. “Within a couple months he made me captain alongside her.”

“Really?”

“Really. Jenny had an awful attitude, and it leached onto the team. I don’t know if Coach thought I could teach her something or be a better leader. I never found out, and nothing changed in the three years I played for them. Teenage girls are cliquey in a ‘we don’t like you but you’re good for the team’ kind of way.”

“I’m really sorry, Tati.” The sincerity in Weston’s hazel eyes makes mine prickle. Would that girl from the photo, that State Champion, see guilt in me now, or that undefinable otherness

that comes with the bittersweet kiss of moving on? What would I see in her now, these years later?

“Don’t be.” Pressing the browse button on my camera, I click through the photos I’d been collecting these past months, of Weston and his team, Canyon Star’s soccer field, and more recently some of us, too. “The love we feel for something doesn’t disappear just because we step away from it. It can exist in other places.” The pad of my thumb trails over the matte black of the camera.

“I understand that a lot.” He pulls me close, and I lean my head on his shoulder, starting to hum. “What song is that?” he asks suddenly.

I shrug. “Just some song we used to sing at soccer camp when I was little.”

“Eagle Point Soccer Camp?” The idea that we attended the same soccer camp in our youth strikes me with awe. Weston pulls me off the ground and we stroll closer to the overlook as he begins singing: “*Sittin’ on a bench one day, thinkin’ what’s the point of life anyway? To be rich, have a nice car, or be famous like a movie star?*”

I join in. “*And on that day I began my quest, to become soccer’s very best...*”

We sing the last part together. “*On the search for life’s greatest goal...Life’s greatest goal!*”

Weston kisses me on the forehead, and we spend the rest of our hike taking sloppy candid photos of each other as we venture back down Red Rock Canyon.

“You know,” he muses at a rest point, “my first summer at that camp I must have been four or five. The coaches told our group to start dribbling the ball and I kid you not, we all picked them up and bounced them like basketballs.”

I barrel over and nearly expel the water in my throat. I raise my water bottle in salute.
“Happens to the best of us.”

It hadn’t been hard walking away from my team. It hadn’t been hard walking away from my coach either, who saw my potential but also watched love turn to contempt. No, the hardest part was walking away from my soccer ball. Its spherical body abandoned and useless without its player. I felt it detach from myself like a limb, a vital organ, an essence fading from my life in the dimming of a flame. I used to wonder if one day I’d forget the feel of it shifting between my feet, the balanced weight of it juggling between knee, foot, knee. I wondered if I’d remember what it felt like to point your toe, but don’t look down, look at your target, and watch the ball soar to net like a falling star, some cosmic event occurring in the breath of a heartbeat that turns a shot into a goal.

The image has never left, and I never did forget.

There’s a Thanksgiving banquet held in a lavish venue decked out in the team’s colors of sunflower yellow and midnight blue. The CSU logo is plastered on every plate, cup, and napkin with the propensity of a kindergarten birthday party. Ben and I stroll about the expanse of players, family, and friends gathered to celebrate the approach of the College Cup. I snap some photos with the players and Coach Nally while Ben interviews them about Weston.

“How would you describe your captain?” he asks Chester, who chuckles and finds Weston across the room shoving a plate of rolls at Soren and Logan while muttering something about carb-loading.

Chester counts on his fingers. “Charismatic, stubborn, and a hopeless romantic.” He winks at me before his features soften. “And the greatest captain and friend I’ve known. The most passionate and dedicated player, to soccer and to us.”

When dinner is served, Weston hands me a whopping plate of turkey, mashed potatoes, and green bean casserole, which I happily devour. Between bites Weston sneaks kisses to my cheek and rubs my back casually while chatting up the rest of the table.

We were settling in for pumpkin pie and apple crumble when he points to two men dressed in navy suits speaking to Coach Nally. “Those are some of the scouts that’ll be at the College Cup. I can introduce you to them if you’d like.”

I follow his eager gaze, unstringing his arm from around my shoulder and intertwining our fingers. “It’s alright, Wes. Tonight is about you and the team.”

Although the championship is indoors, frigid December air permeates the fieldhouse. It is the graininess of image noise, the bend of the sword. They dominate the entire first half of the game. I jog up and down the sidelines, feeling in my bones that I am out there with them. Sprinting, passing, dribbling, shooting. Four league scouts are somewhere in the audience. Determination is etched into the team’s faces, their bodies.

Larson lets a high-flying shot in. They regroup. Max and Brian rally the midfield and they overpower the other team quickly, sending a through-ball to Weston, who breaks away and scores. The game is tied 2-2. The other team's captain calls to his defense to shut down the strikers. If the game ends in a tie, they go straight into penalty kicks, no overtime. It's the worst possible way to win or lose a soccer game. There's three minutes left.

Everyone's moving and calling to one another. Coach screams at the referee when Tumbleweed is sideswiped, but Quinn tumbles, rolls, and is back on his feet in an instant, the ball trailing in front of him. The ref lets him play it. I raise my camera, arms shaking in anticipation, but I'm there—I'm in it.

Weston is open inside the penalty box. Tumbleweed takes it down the sidelines; fans are roaring. He crosses it and it soars overhead. There's that moment again, between a breath and a heartbeat. Weston's eyes are on the ball, that falling star.

A defender barrels into him.

My camera falls from my hands, and I'm frozen in time again. The force of the fall snaps the clips attaching it to its strap, the clips I fiddle with every time I speak to Weston. The soft, unmarred grass of the sidelines cushions the blow just as another sharp *pop* resounds from the field. Weston goes down.

In the time it took to snap a picture, his lens—his world—shattered.

A torn ACL can take anywhere from nine to twelve months to heal properly, the doctors say. And even after that, it would take more time and rigorous physical therapy to get him back on the field.

When he opens his eyes after surgery, he already knows. Of course he knows. His cheeks are rosy and eyes glassy from the anesthetics. He tries to blink away his pain. He refuses to look at his wrapped knee, watery gaze trained on the wall ahead. I want to tell him it will be okay, but I don't know if it will. That all depends on him. His parents speak in hushed whispers out in the hall. They seem to know who I am and don't question my place here.

"You should go." He closes his eyes, and I think he's gone back to sleep before his voice catches. "It's over." A stray tear falls down his cheek and he swipes it away with a limp hand.

I drag my chair closer to the bedside and grip his hand. He strains weakly to yank it away. I tell him that it doesn't have to be over. I think of our pictures, his and mine.

"The leagues won't contract an injured player. Too risky..." He sniffs.

"Then they'll take the risk, Wes. If you work hard enough, you'll heal in time for next season."

He shakes his head excruciatingly slow, back pressing taut against the raised head of the bed like he's trying to get away from me. Does he now see in me what I saw in him the first time we met? All that love held in time and space for us to keep. I know what he's going to say seconds before he says it: "You don't understand."

He's just woken up and he's not thinking straight and he's just suffered an injury that could end his dream. "You are *not* walking away from this," I say anyway. "I won't let you."

"Big talk coming from a quitter."

Weston Lockwood used to have that spark in his eyes. Photographing him felt like a return home. Maybe seeing through the eyes of a god is not meant for people like us, witnesses to

fate with only the intent of capturing it before it slips away into tragedy that won't ever have an explanation or answer to our questions. We capture it anyway, to let those gods know we're still here.

"You guys won," I rasp. He doesn't look at me as I go. I deliberately take my time easing my jacket over each shoulder. He doesn't apologize. The scuffing of my sneakers bounces off the sand-colored walls as I step to the door. I feel as though the pages of our scrapbook are being torn one by one, all the memories coalesced in the last three months reduced to glossy photopaper ash.

For the second time in my life, I walk away from something I fell in love with.

The deadline for Weston's story is 8 a.m. tomorrow. By tomorrow night, everyone will have access to the article that will throw Weston's future in the trash. The scouts who were at the game are probably packing their bags, thinking about how promising an athlete he was to have gone out so young.

Ben had forwarded me his updated draft while I was at the hospital, the document clad with its damning headline and pitying prose that he most likely didn't even bat an eye writing.

I have three hours to change it.

I throw all my stuff on the couch in my apartment and set an espresso brewing. While the smell of coffee warms the air, I pop the SIM card from my camera and place it ceremoniously in front of my laptop like I'm about to perform magic.

There was a time when everything had been out of focus. Shutter speeds so fast that I blinked through existence while everyone around me wondered what the hell I was doing. What

the hell I had done. I'd been frozen in time, snapping forward but forever trapped in the frame of *soccer protégé turned burnout*. I didn't get to tell my story the way I wanted to. Weston Lockwood's story will be different.

Sitting on the corner of my desk is a different frame with a photo not too far off from the one Weston showed me at Red Rock. It had been taken after we won States, lined up in front of a goal wearing glinting gold medals. I stood at the center of the team holding our trophy, eyes and smile alight with something more pronounced, more surreal than victory. That girl, I used to think, is gone. But now I feel that she remains inside me, playing Hotel Tag and singing camp songs, catching memories like fireflies in jars and watching falling stars.

I used to fear that I hadn't done right by her, by that little girl that loved soccer more than anything in the world. Looking at her now, I resolve that she'd be proud.

And it was enough.

I pull up the contact information Carly sent me for her uncle at Snow Sports, and open a draft email, titling it *Tatiana Reigns: Sports Photography Interest Form*. Before I finish the rest, I return my attention to Weston's article. I delete the headline first. In the silence of the room and the gentle cadence of wind-caught snow outside, a tune rises up from within.

I smile and hum the familiar song as I type *Weston Lockwood: The Search for Life's Greatest Goal*.

I begin to upload the photos.