



The Comeback Season

By Jennifer E. Smith

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Baseball brings them together—but will his secret keep them apart? Find out in this heartbreakingly beautiful novel from Jennifer E. Smith, author of *The Statistical Probability of Love at First Sight*.

The last place Ryan Walsh should be this afternoon is on a train heading to Wrigley Field. She should be in class, enduring yet another miserable day of her first year of high school. But for once, Ryan isn't thinking about what she should be doing. She's not worried about her lack of friends, or her suffering math grade, or how it's been five whole years since the last time she was really and truly happy. Because she's finally returning to the place that her father loved, where the two of them spent so many afternoons cheering on their team. And on this—the fifth anniversary of his death—it feels like there's nowhere else in the world she should be.

Ryan is once again filled with hope as she makes her way to the game. Good luck is often hard to come by at a place like Wrigley Field, but it's on this day that she meets Nick, the new kid from her school, who seems to love the Cubs nearly as much as she does. But Nick carries with him a secret that makes Ryan wonder if anyone can ever really escape their past, or believe in the promise of those reassuring words: "Wait till next year." Is it too much for Ryan to hope that this year, this season, might be her comeback season?

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Editorial Review

Review

"A wonderfully written story about love, heartache, and loss that digs deep into the most important lesson sports have to offer us -- hope. As Smith so eloquently tells us, it's not about winning or losing, it's about stepping up to the plate, over and over again. This story -- impossible to put down -- will stay with you like your biggest loss...and your greatest comeback." -- Tim Green, author of *Football Genius* and *Football Hero*

"Jennifer E. Smith has taken the themes of young love, deep loss, and professional baseball -- in the form of the hapless Cubs -- and turned them into a terrific read that overflows with passion and insight. Lessons about the saving nature of hope pervade this story of memory and yearning. Here's one old sportswriter who calls *The Comeback Season* a leadoff homer by an All-Star rookie." -Rick Telander, senior sports columnist, *Chicago Sun-Times*

"In a deeply touching and profound debut, Jennifer E. Smith sensitively explores the parallels and intersections between the game of baseball and the game of life. Smith is a writer and a fan who understands the details and depth of the great American pastime and of the human heart as well." -- Bob Krech, author of *Rebound*

"*The Comeback Season* is a warm and brave, if heartbreaking, story about first love. It will make you cry and laugh and cry again!" -- Melissa de la Cruz, author of *The Au Pairs* and *Blue Bloods*

"*The Comeback Season* is one of those books that breaks your heart -- and can't be put down. It is a beautifully written story about loss of innocence, the strength of the human spirit, and why there is nothing quite like being a Chicago Cubs fan." -- John Feinstein, bestselling author of *Last Shot*, *Vanishing Act*, and *Cover-up*

About the Author

Jennifer E. Smith is the author of *Hello, Goodbye and Everything in Between*, *The Geography of You and Me*, *This Is What Happy Looks Like*, *The Statistical Probability of Love at First Sight*, *The Storm Makers*, *You Are Here*, and *The Comeback Season*. She earned her master's degree in creative writing from the University of St. Andrews, and her work has been translated into thirty languages.

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Chapter One

OPENING DAY AT WRIGLEY FIELD ISN'T ALWAYS APRIL 8. It's not like Christmas or the Fourth of July, with their dependable calendar slots, the reassurance of a fixed number. So that it should fall on April 8 of this year—the first of Ryan Walsh's uneven stint in high school—seems reason enough for her to be on a southbound 'L' train at the exact moment she should be taking her seat in science class. The day is beautiful, blindingly bright and faintly breezy, and the Chicago skyline looms a startling shade of silver in the distance. Ryan clutches her backpack as the train lurches from side to side, her forehead pressed against the thick plastic window.

A man in a Ryne Sandberg jersey wafts a foam finger in her direction, and even as she scoots farther toward the window, Ryan's heart beats fast with excitement. There are college kids drinking sweet-flavored vodka drinks from plastic bottles, old men with sweat-stained blue caps, a group of boys trading blue and red

markers to finish up a cardboard sign. At each stop, as they collect more fans, as the noise level grows, as they wind their way along Lake Michigan toward the center of it all, she feels it: the fluttery hope, the tentative promise. It is game day in Chicago, the first true day of spring. There is, before them all, a whole new season.

Ryan is not typically reckless in this way. She is, in fact, feeling slightly nauseated at the thought of her impulsive departure after third period. Across the packed train car, she thinks she spots a boy from her math class, the shock of white from a cast on his arm peeking through at elbow level in the crowd. But at the next stop, when the doors open and a new surge of people presses their way inside, he's suddenly gone, and Ryan decides she's only looking for a reason to feel guilty and to think of school.

"Next stop, Addison," the conductor calls out, and the train erupts in wild cheering. Ryan tugs at the drawstrings of her hooded sweatshirt and smiles to herself.

This, after all, is where she feels closest to him. Not when she sits at what had once been his seat at the dinner table. Not when her mom unwittingly sings their song under her breath while she does the dishes. Not when she looks at her younger sister, whose eyes are his: gray-blue and swimming.

No, right here, with the stadium fast approaching and all the possibilities of these nine long innings laid bare: this is where it's easiest to imagine her father still beside her.

She'd been just ten when he was killed in a rafting accident while on a trip to Colorado. Soon after, Mom sold their season tickets—two seats on the third base line, just eight rows back—to help save money while she looked for a job. Emily had always been too young anyway, and Mom was never interested much beyond the novelty of the festival-like atmosphere of Wrigley Field.

But the ivy-covered back wall is the background to most of Ryan's memories of him. She can see his face most clearly when she thinks of him at the ballpark. It was here he'd taught her to keep score when she was only six, patiently helping her fill in the tiny diamond grids across her playbook, and it was here—however unknowingly—she'd begun to prepare herself for his absence. Where better to learn of heartbreak and loss than Wrigley Field? What better place to harden your heart?

At the games, he'd throw an arm across the back of her seat and lean in. "If the Cubs win," he'd say, "I'll give up chocolate for a whole week."

"It has to be something more important than that," Ryan would say accusingly, as if he didn't care enough to negotiate with something better than candy.

"Not for this game," he'd protest. "It's not even our division."

She'd pull her blue cap down low and frown until he reconsidered.

"Okay, fine," he'd say with a grin. "If the Cubs win, I'll eat only vegetables for the rest of the week."

"How about if they win, you have to give me five piggybacks a day?"

"*Five a day?*" he'd say, laughing. "You drive a hard bargain."

"It's for the good of the team," she'd insist.

It was a dangerous bargaining tool, this team of theirs. There was always the chance they'd be left with nothing.

Since her dad died, Ryan has only been to three games. The first two with her mom and sister soon after the accident, where they got lost amid the thick crowds and the too-cheerful organ music. Ryan had barely been able to watch the game, instead working to split open peanut shells the way he'd taught her, but they felt dry and dusty in her mouth. Emily cried when someone in the row behind them spilled beer at their feet, and Mom held her close, looking out over the top of her head with a dazed expression, even when everyone else rose for the national anthem. They'd left at the top of the fourth inning, and on their second try a few games later, made it only to the bottom of the fifth. It was soon after that when Mom sold the tickets.

A year later, sitting with a friend and her parents at the third game, Ryan realized she'd forgotten how to keep score the way her dad taught her. She sat with her pencil poised over the scorecard and blinked back tears.

That was five years ago. She hasn't been back since.

But today is different. Today is April 8.

When the train slows to a halt, the passengers shift restlessly until the doors open. Over their shoulders, Ryan can see the huge wall of the stadium rising up against a cloudless sky, and she draws in a breath. The air smells of that peculiar combination of hot dogs and springtime, leather mitts and freshly cut grass, and all of it blends into one scent, one thought, one thing: *Dad*.

“Opening Day programs,” a man in red calls out, waving the glossy booklets high in the air. “Cubs programs here!”

Ryan steps off the platform, swept toward the stadium along with the rest of the crowd, and just briefly, she closes her eyes. April 8 may not always be Opening Day, but it *is* always—without fail and without end—the anniversary of the day her father died. And this, she thinks, peering up at the pennants waving lazily in the spring breeze, is reason enough.

Ryan had woken this morning with a dull sense of loss, and when she rolled over to glance at her clock, she remembered and burrowed deeper beneath the covers. Five years ago on this day, she'd been pulled from her fourth-grade classroom and made to sit in the nurse's office until her mom arrived, red-eyed and stunned with her three-year-old sister in tow, to tell her what she knew—that in the chaos of the Colorado River, on the trip her dad had been planning with his college buddies for years, the raft had overturned. Of the group, it had been her father who was tossed in the worst possible direction, where the water was quicker, the river bottom rockier. It was the school nurse who leaned in to clarify the message: “He's gone, honey,” she said, and Ryan began to cry.

Sometimes, it seems she hasn't stopped crying since.

This morning, when she came downstairs for breakfast, Emily was already sitting at the table singing to herself, her legs swinging from the chair as she picked at a blueberry muffin. Her younger sister loves dolls and horses, stickers and puppies, and is so far from what Ryan had been at eight—or ever—that she often has trouble believing they could have been raised in the same family.

Though in a way, they haven't been.

Emily had been too young to remember Dad, and for that, Ryan can't fault her. But her sister's allegiance to Kevin makes Ryan feel like the last survivor of a long-lost era. Their stepfather is a nice enough lawyer who Mom met at the driving range when she decided to take golf lessons a couple years ago. At the real estate agency where she'd started working after Dad died, golf was apparently more than just a hobby. It was the common language. "It's a sport that's actually useful," Mom said, looking pointedly at Ryan. "It's good for business."

Dad had been a sportswriter, and even *he* didn't consider golf a real sport.

Kevin—wearer of ties, believer in rules, hater of baseball—had joined the family shortly afterward, and it is with him that Emily has grown up. Because of this, it's impossible to blame her for not understanding that you don't flip the television channel when the Cubs are on.

This morning, Ryan had looked on wearily from across the kitchen table as Emily folded and refolded a muffin wrapper like a study in origami. Twice, she opened her mouth to say something—to offer some small reminder of the day—but her sister was bright-eyed and ready for school, waiting for Kevin to drive her, waiting for Mom to kiss them good-bye, and Ryan didn't have the heart to draw her into this awful anniversary, no matter how much she wished for someone to share in her sorrow. When Mom came downstairs, she would—as she did each year on this day—hug Ryan just a little bit tighter, linger just a moment longer when she kissed her forehead, smooth back the tangles of hair from her face. They would exchange watery smiles, and without having to say anything, without making any sort of fuss, they would sit down to a breakfast of slightly burned bacon and scrambled eggs—Dad's favorite. Anything more to commemorate the day would be too difficult; anything less, heartless.

But today, Mom came down holding Kevin's hand, the two of them hiding smiles and practically giggling. They stood before the table, Kevin adjusting his tie, Mom with a hand on the back of Emily's chair.

"What's going on?" Ryan asked, frowning. She sat Indian style on the kitchen chair, her arms tucked up inside her sweatshirt. Mom stooped down to place a hand on top of Emily's, and behind her, Kevin shifted from one foot to the other, bobbing his head of thinning hair and grinning stupidly.

"We only just found out for sure," she said. "I'm pregnant."

Mom looked to them both, smiling hesitantly, until Emily squealed and hopped up from her chair, clapping her hands, and Mom's smile broadened. She raised her eyes over Ryan's shoulder to Kevin, and with that look—the flecks of light in her eyes, the faintest hint of joy—Ryan's heart dropped. *Of all days*, she thought, as she pushed back from the table and pounded up the stairs to her room.

Later, when she heard the knock, Ryan simply tucked her face into her pillow and grunted. She looked up when the door creaked open, and Mom poked her head in.

"Mind if I join you?"

Ryan said nothing, but curled into a ball to make room at the foot of the bed.

"I didn't forget," Mom said, resting a hand on Ryan's ankle. She tilted her head thoughtfully. "I think, in a way, he'd be happy about it, actually. A new beginning on a day like today. It's just the kind of thing he'd find meaning in if he were here."

“If he were here,” Ryan said, staring fiercely out the window, “this wouldn’t have happened.”

They sat quietly on the bed together, the sounds from the cars outside rising up through the half-open window. Ryan waited for Mom to say something more—to suggest they go downstairs for bacon and eggs, or to tell her she’ll never love anyone more than Dad, not Kevin and not even this new baby—but they both remained silent.

Finally, Ryan eyed her stomach. “When’s it due?”

“October,” Mom said, placing a hand on her belly, obviously pleased by the question. Ryan shrugged, watching the Cubs flag on her closet door flutter in the breeze from the window. It wasn’t as if she’d have anything else to do in October.

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Users Review

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