They all said I would never amount to much. And it was easy to believe. After all, I hadn’t. Well…not by their standards. Probably not by yours either. When you’re growing up, folks don’t think much of you if you can’t throw a ball, or swing a bat, or you don’t want to put on a jersey. They call you things because you can’t, and other worse things because you don’t want to.

So I figured, I’ve been called enough by kids. But by Dad? My brothers? And my mom, who never said a word, just silently agreed. So I grew up quietly by myself, realizing that I had disappointed everybody.

(as a family member) “Your brother got a letter in track.” Yeah, well he got an ‘F’ in geology, that’s a letter, too.

(as a family member) “Your sister - you can’t even throw a ball as good as your sister!”

And I remember one day, I said, “Maybe, but I’m a decent boy, and a decent human being, and I don’t think any of you understand that.”

Not a very good thing to say, and by the very nature of saying it, they reminded me again – well of course again – that I wasn’t – and by whatever standards they had…I never would be.
I got out when I was eighteen, got a math scholarship to college. Oh I did! But it didn’t matter. Trig got me out of the house, away from all that, but you never stop thinking that you’re a worthless piece of…coal. Not when you’ve been told as much all these years. And finally, when it didn’t matter what anyone else thought, it mattered more. Enough, that I wanted to come back and wave something in their face. Something that said I could succeed, and I didn’t care any more if they liked me.

There was this park I’d walk through at college…slowly of course. I was out of shape and letting some kind of Calculus problem work itself out in my head. Yeah, I like working out Calc to have a good time – never knew why that made me such a bad guy. And everyone in the park looks so happy.

They’re jogging, walking the dog, the baby, the husband, making out, reading…whatever you could do in between the time it took to go to the bathroom, because it was always closed for plumbing repairs – at least that’s what they said. They put up this workout course…only a few guys used it, but there was this one in particular, I guess he was twenty-five.

Not sure.

When you’re eighteen, everything over twenty looks older, and a lot more grown up than you are. He jumps up. He’s got this overhand grip, and he sets his teeth and takes a breath and starts pulling himself up. It’s like an eighteen-wheeler revving up out of a truck stop.

And you could see his fingers in a grip of steel, holding the bar, more like metal clamping on metal, and all his muscles bulging in and
out of his arms, and sweat dripping off his face down to the sand below. Looked like a gear shaft – like a machine used to mine ore off the side of a mountain. It was in a way, the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. And I knew somehow that I could do the same thing.