

“Great-grandfather tell me about the home run you hit off Warren Spahn. And tell me about the time you drank beer with Mickey Mantle?”

“Home run, no. Mantle, no. Beer, yes. And the beer was half the damn reason I didn’t.”

“Didn’t what, great-grandfather?”

“Didn’t hit a homer off Warren Spahn or anybody else. Didn’t make it, damn it. And stop calling me great-grandfather.”

“But you did great-grandfather. You made it to the major leagues and you hit three home runs and one was off Warren Spahn. It says so right here in my baseball encyclopedia. Jacob read:

*“Stanley Bendis, born Benton, Pennsylvania, height 5-11, weight 170, bats left, throws...”*

“Yeah, blah, blah, blah, don’t it say, too, I only got in 50 games and batted .220?”

“Thirty-nine and .207. But great-grandfather you were a professional ballplayer for 11 years.”

“Professional? I coulda made more in the mines. Why do you think they call them the minors?”

“Very funny great-grandfather, but, still, you were a major leaguer. You played in Baker Bowl. It’s the coolest thing.”

“Cool? Oh brother. And stop calling me great-grandfather.”

“What should I call you then?”

“Pops. Stanley. I don’t know.”

“The little kids call you pops. I’m big now, great-grandfather.”

“Yeah, you are big. Well, tall, anyway.”

Tall Jacob visited his great-grandfather at his grandmother's house every week. Sometimes two or three times a week. There was no computer at his grandmother's house, so Jacob always lugged his baseball encyclopedia and a printout of his great-grandfather's minor league record. Great-grandfather sat at the kitchen table with a beer and Tall Jacob loomed over him and peppered him with questions.

What was it like in San Antonio? Did you ride the rails all over California? Do you know you led the New England League in stolen bases in 1948? Do you know you were teammates with Jimmy Piersall in Scranton, Pennsylvania and what was it like there?

Jacob's great-grandfather spit nails. At least that's what he said, "Answering your questions is like spitting nails," he said.

One day Jacob brought Brandon with him. "He's my friend from school and he wants your autograph."

"Autograph? What kind of cockamamie stuff has Jacob been telling you?"

"He said you played in the major leagues, sir."

"So did a million other guys, why don't you get their autographs?"

Chastised, Brandon, who looked half the size of Jacob, turned red and squirmed. "I don't know any of them other guys," he said.

"Huh, what'd you say, kid?"

"Great-grandfather," Jacob said, "please sign the ball. What's the harm?"

Brandon handed great-grandfather a ball and pen and he signed it.

Some days Jacob brought his little sister Renee to visit. Renee wanted to ask a question but she was afraid. She looked down and shuffled her feet and stammered, "a... would you..." she

stopped and looked up at her brother. “She wants to take you to school for show-and-tell,” Jacob said.

Great-grandfather moaned. Jacob thought he might really spit nails. “I don’t want no damn kids staring at me like I’m some kinda freak.”

Renee’s smile fell. Her eyes got moist. Great-grandfather couldn’t stand to see Renee cry, so it was off to school. Fifth period. Miss. Redding’s sixth grade history class. Jacob, dismissed from 11th grade Spanish, was there, too.

Renee stood in front of her classmates. Great-grandfather sat in the teacher’s chair. Miss Redding stood by the door.

“This is my great-grandfather Stanley Bendis and he played baseball in the major leagues for the St. Louis Browns and Philadelphia Phillies.”

The girls giggled. The boys stared at Renee’s great-grandfather like he was some kind of freak.

Renee said, “You can ask any questions.”

Hands shot up.

Renee called on Max. “My dad said baseball players are a bunch of millionaires and half of them are on dope. Are you a millionaire?” Max asked

“A millionaire? I’m lucky I got a pot to piss in.”

“Mr. Bendis, please, watch your language or I’ll have to ask you to leave.” Miss Redding scolded.

Great-grandfather wanted to say, good and good-bye, but Renee looked as though she was about to cry, so he said, “Sorry. No. I’m no millionaire. Ballplayers today are, but I played a long time ago. I’m not even a thousandaire.”

The kids laughed at that.

“And I’m not on dope.”

They laughed again.

They asked him how old he was. Eighty-nine.

They asked him who was the best player he ever saw and who was the worst. Ted Williams and himself.

They asked him if he played Little League. There was no such thing.

They asked him what he did after baseball. “Roofs,” he said.

“Roofs?” asked Miss Redding.

“Yeah, I put a roof on half the houses in this town and tarred the one above our heads right now.”

Renee called on Jacob. “Tell us about the first time you batted in the major leagues.”

“Can’t remember.”

Renee read from her notes. “It was on September 7 in 1950 against Bobby Shantz of the Philadelphia A’s in Baker Bowl.”

Great-grandfather paused and cleared his throat. The room went quiet. “Probably struck out.”

Renee smiled. Jacob laughed, the kids all laughed and great-grandfather laughed with them.

Jacob couldn’t remember the last time he had seen great-grandfather laugh.

Renee walked great grandfather out the main entrance where her grandmother picked him up. As she pulled up, Renee asked great-grandfather if he was going to the game.

“Game? What game?”

“The first high school game of the season. Today at 4:30. Jacob is playing first base.”

“Hmm. Funny, he never said anything to me about it.”

“He said you wouldn’t go.”

“Well, he’s right. High school kids don’t know how to play ball and I don’t want to see it.”

“It would mean a lot to him,” Renee said. “I’m going with my dad. We’ll pick you up.”

But when Renee and her dad went to pick great-grandfather up, he wasn’t home.

Renee sat in the infield bleachers with her girlfriends. One of the players on the other team hit a foul ball down the right field line and over the fence. Renee watched a man stand up out of a folding chair as the ball came down just behind him. The man raised his left hand, reached back, caught the ball then tripped and fell over his folding chair.

Renee gasped with a hand to her mouth. “Ohmigod,” she said, “that’s great grandfather.”

She ran down the bleacher steps and along the fence to where great grandfather fell. As she ran she saw he hadn’t gotten up yet and several people stood over him looking down at him.

As she got closer she heard him. “Get away from me. I’m all right. I can get up and I don’t need any help.”

Ignoring his words, two young guys grabbed him, one by each arm, got him to his feet, righted his chair and sat him in it, laughing as they did. Just then Renee arrived.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yep. Fine.”

“Thought you weren’t coming.”

“Yeah, well, your grandma was going this way anyways.”

“Nice catch,” she said stifling a laugh.

“Yep,” he said. “held on to it, too.” He gave her the ball and she tossed it to one of the players who had gathered along the fence with Jacob to see if great grandfather was okay.

Satisfied, Jacob and the rest of the boys went back on the field.

“Jacob’s doing pretty good,” Renee said. “He’s catching all the throws.”

“Yeah, I guess, but when the hell is he going to bat.”

“He’s not. One of the other boys bats for him.”

“What? What kind of cockamamie rule is that?”

Renee thought for a few seconds and said, “It’s the kind of cockamamie rule the Browns sure could have used on you.”

She looked down at her great-grandfather and they both laughed.